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The Philosophical Corps

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CORPS

by Everett B. Cole

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I

WITHIN THE GREAT hemispherical viewscreen, brilliant spots of multicolored light had sprung into being. Their light flowed outward, to glance fitfully from a multitude of spheres which grouped about their primaries. These were the suns and planets of the Empire of Findur, which spread over a third of the screen.

Not far from center screen, small sparks dodged swiftly about in emptiness, to form a constantly moving, yet tight, ball-cluster. And inside this cluster, a vivid, pulsating glow radiated thin lines of light. From the interweaving sparks forming the cluster, flickered other thin lines of light, to feed the glow till it outshone even the sun of Findur.

"It was at this point in the action that Captain Tero called me," announced a voice from the darkness beside the hemisphere.

"He requested permission to cut a ten degree, four microsecond void, since he was fully englobed and his screens were in danger of overloading under Finduran fire."

The speaker paused, then continued.

"I granted permission, since I could see no other feasible means of disengaging him. To be sure, the fleet could have formed an outer shell on the globe and smothered the attack, but Tero's

screens would never have borne the strain. We could have controlled the Finduran fleet, but the loss of the Kleeros would have been a certainty." Again, the speaker paused.

"Tero made immediate acknowledgment of the message from the Rilno and cut in his space warp."

From the pulsating glow, a narrow fan of darkness spread, occulting even the darkness of space. Before it, darting sparks vanished and the glow faded, to become another spark. It ceased its erratic motion and commenced travel in a steady curve, approaching the observers.

Abruptly, its motion again became erratic. The dark fan widened, vibrated—swung over a wide angle, its swing crossing toward the Imperial stars. As it passed, gleaming suns flickered like candles before a high wind, and went out. A black, impenetrable curtain spread over most of the scene.

The origin of the dark fan expanded, became a huge, dazzling sphere, then faded and was gone.

For a few seconds, the screen remained active, to show an irregularly shaped pocket of black amidst the faint glow of far distant stars. It hung above and to the left of center screen, an empty, opaque spot in space, where a few moments before had been suns, planets, and embattled ships.

"As you gentlemen know," the voice added tiredly, "before a space warp can be cut in, all screens must be lowered to prevent random secondary effects and permanent damage to the ship. The cut is so phased as to make it virtually impossible for a shear beam or other force to penetrate, but there is one chance in several million of shear penetration while the warp is being constituted. The only assumption we could make was that a shear must have struck Tero's controls while his screen was phasing.

"He seems to have swung out of control, then disrupted his ship to spare the whole sector from destruction. Before he could act, however, he had destroyed his attackers and virtually the entire Finduran Empire. And the warp remained on long enough to allow permanent establishment. Of course, this is a reconstruction,

since we have only the viewscreen record to base opinions on. Tero did not report before disrupting."

The scene on the viewer faded and the room lights came on.

The speaker stood revealed as a slender, tall humanoid. His narrow face with its high brows and sharply outlined features gave the impression of continual amusement with the universe and all that was in it, but the slight narrowing of the eyes—the barely perceptible tightening of the mouth—evidenced uncertain anxiety. Fine lines on his face indicated that care and serious thought were no strangers to this man. Now, he stood at attention, his hands aligned at the sides of his light grey trousers.

Fleet Commander Dalthos A-Riman, of the Seventeenth Border Sector, awaited the pleasure of the Board of Inquiry.

Before him, the being at the desk nodded at the other members of the Board.

"Are there any questions, Gentlemen?"

A small, lithe member raised a hand. A-Riman looked toward him. He had met Sector Chief Sesnir before—knew his sharp, incisive questions.

"You said Captain Tero was at point, Commander," stated Sesnir. "How did he happen to get so far in advance of the rest of the fleet as to allow englobement?"

"You remember, Sir," replied A-Riman, "the Findurans had developed a form of polyphase screen which made their ships nearly undetectable when at rest. We could only pick them up when in action, or within less than a half parsec range. This encounter took place several parsecs outside of their normal area of fleet operation."

The Fleet Commander brought a hand to his face, then dropped it abruptly.

"I was about to call Tero in to form a more compact grouping when he ran into the middle of their formation."

"You mean they had maneuvered a fleet well inside the Federation borders, and had it resting in ambush?" persisted the questioner. "What was wrong with your light scouts?"

"That, Sir," A-Riman told him, "was the reason I approached in fleet strength. I had received no scout reports for three days. I knew there was enemy activity in the area, but had no intelligence reports."

"You mean," another Board member broke in, "you went charging into an unknown situation in open fleet formation?"

"I thought it was necessary, Sir. I regarded open formation as precautionary, since damage to one ship would be far less serious than involvement of my entire fleet in an ambush. I was sure I had lost several scouts, and was not inclined to lose more. Tero volunteered to draw fire, then planned to take evasive action while the rest of the fleet moved in." A-Riman paused.

"Except for superb planning and execution by the Finduran Admiral and a million-to-one accident, Tero would have extricated himself easily and we could have moved in to take police action in accordance with the Council's orders."

"I see," commented the questioning member. "Probably would have done about that same thing myself, at that."

"Why," demanded Sesnir impatiently, "didn't you simply open up from a safe distance with a ten microsecond, forty degree space warp? You'd still have been within your orders. We'd have saved a ship and its crew. The Findurans wouldn't have given us any more trouble—ever, and we wouldn't have a permanent space fold to worry about in Sector Seventeen."

A-Riman looked at the Sector Chief.

"That, Sir," he announced firmly, "is just what I wanted to avoid. I felt, and still feel, that complete destruction of suns, planets, and youthful cultures, however inimical they may seem to be at the time, is wasteful, dangerous, and in direct violation of the first law of Galactic Ethics."

The President of the Board looked up.

"The Ethic refers to Federation members, Commander."

"I believe it should be extended to include all intelligent life, Sir."

"You will find, 'Treat all others as you would wish yourself to

be treated in like circumstances,' a very poor defense against a well-directed shear beam," commented Sesnir.

"True, Sir." A-Riman smiled. "But there are possibilities. Why . . ."

Vandor ka Bensir, Chief of Stellar Guard Operations, rapped on his desk.

"Gentlemen," he admonished quietly. "A discussion of Galactic Ethics is always of great interest, but I believe it is out of order here. Unless there are more questions or comments pertinent to this inquiry, I shall close the Board." He looked around the room.

"No comments?" He waited.

"Then, as President of this Board of Inquiry, I order the Board closed for deliberation." Again, he rapped on his desk.

"Will you please retire, Commander? We will notify you when we have reached our findings and recommendations."

As the door closed, Bensir turned to the other Board members.

"The floor is open for discussion," he said. "You're the junior member, Commander Dal Klar. Do you have any comments?"

"Admiral, I have what almost amounts to a speech." Dal Klar glanced at the Chief of Operations, then looked slowly about at the rest of his colleagues.

"But I hesitate to take up too much of the Board's time."

"You mean that juniors should be seen and not heard?" Ka Bensir smiled.

"Something like that, Sir."

"This Board," ruled its President, "has all the time in the Universe. Members can think out loud. They can require any technical assistance they may wish and they may bring up any points they think desirable. You can speak as you choose and come to whatever conclusions you want to. The floor is yours."

Dal Klar took a deep breath.

"Well, in that case, here I go. In the first place, I think that A-Riman acted properly and in accordance with his ethical code and that of his culture. If the gentlemen will remember, A-Riman is from the Celstor Republic, which is one of the oldest members

of the Federation. A-Riman has personally written two notable commentaries on Philosophy and Ethics, both of which have been well received in the Federation."

Dal Klar glanced toward Sector Chief Sesnir.

"Had the Commander destroyed without warning, inflicting utter and complete destruction on a young and comparatively helpless civilization, he would have been acting in direct contravention to his own stated ethical code. In such a case, he would have been deserving of all the centure we could bring to bear. As it is, I believe that he acted in accordance with the best traditions of the Guard, and simply met with an unforeseeable and unfortunate accident which could have happened to any Fleet Commander who went on that mission."

Dal Klar paused, cleared his throat, then concluded.

"We have heard definite testimony that there was no laxity in drill or maintenance in A-Riman's fleet. On the contrary, some of his officers indicated that he was more particular than most about precise, instant performance, both from personnel and equipment. Certainly, we can't say he was negligent."

As Dal Klar stopped, ka Bensir looked at another Board member, who shook his head.

"I might have phrased it a little differently, Sir," he commented, "but the Commander expressed my views quite adequately. I have nothing to add."

Two more members declined to comment, then Sector Chief Sesnir wagged his head.

"I seem to be in the minority," he remarked, "but I think that the coddling of these young, semi-barbaric and aggressive cultures is suicidal. Before we can teach them our ways of thinking and indoctrinate them with an ethic of galactic scope, they will inflict tremendous damage upon us. They may be even able to subvert some of our own younger members and set up a rival Federation. Then we'll have real trouble." He frowned at the notes on the table before him, then looked up.

"I have read A-Riman's commentaries and I know the history of

the 'Fighting Philosopher.' The truth is, I think that a man with his views should not be in the Combat Arm of the Guard. He is simply too soft."

The Board President nodded. "I'll reserve comment. Will you gentlemen please record your findings?"

A few minutes later, the clerk inserted a small file of recordings into the machine in front of him. The viewscreen lit.

FINDINGS: *The Kleeros, a Class A Guard ship, was lost and a permanent space fold was set up in Sector Seventeen due to the ill-advised tactics of Fleet Commander Dalthos A-Riman, who risked his fleet against an unscouted force rather than destroy a criminal civilization by means at his hand.*

Ka Bensir pointed at Dal Klar, who shook his head.

"No." His voice was decisive.

The pointing finger moved to the next member. Again, the answer was a definite "No." Only one member assented to the proposed finding.

Ka Bensir nodded to the clerk.

FINDINGS: *The Class A Guard ship, Kleeros, was destroyed by its captain to avert major disaster. The cause of the space-warp control failure aboard the Kleeros cannot be accurately determined due to the destruction of the ship with all on board and to the lack of communication prior to that destruction.*

Fleet Commander Dalthos A-Riman was acting within his orders and was using reasonable caution prior to this incident. The failure of the space-warp and drive controls, as well as the permanent space fold resulting from that failure could not have been foreseen by the fleet commander or by Captain Naler a Tero.

Since the use of the Space-warp is recognized as a legitimate defensive tactic by single ships of the Federation, no censure can be brought against Captain Tero for requesting permission to use the warp, nor against Commander A-Riman for granting that permission.

The disaster was due to circumstances beyond the control of any responsible participant.

Again, ka Bensir pointed at Dal Klar, who nodded. "I concur," he said.

The next member assented. So did the next, and the next. Finally, ka Bensir rapped on his desk.

"The findings are complete," he said. "Since we find that no censure will be brought against Commander A-Riman, we need not go into that phase of the matter. Do I hear a verbal motion for a citation for Captain Tero and his crew?"

"Federation Cluster for Tero. Heroic Citations for his crew," rumbled a deep voice.

"Second," came a sharp reply.

"All in favor?"

An assenting murmur arose.

"Unanimous," commented ka Bensir. "Record it."

Vandor ka Bensir drew his side arm.

"Have Fleet Commander Dalthos A-Riman come in."

He laid the weapon on his desk, its needle-like nose pointing away from the door and toward the screen which still bore the accepted findings of the Board, together with the posthumous citation for the Captain and Crew of the Kleeros.

A-Riman stepped in. He glanced at the weapon on the desk, nodded, and looked at the viewscreen.

"Thank you, Gentlemen," he acknowledged. "Now that the inquiry is over, I wish to request reassignment to the Criminal Apprehension Corps. I think that I may be more useful there than in the Combat Arm." He nodded toward the screen.

"In spite of the recorded findings, it is possible that some of you may agree." He smiled sardonically.

"But I have a real reason for requesting reassignment—a reason not wholly derived from the destruction of Findur. I think that I may be able to offer some constructive recommendations and techniques which should result in fewer problems for the Combat Arm in the future, and I want to be in the Criminal Apprehension Corps where I can work out and prove my ideas."

2

THE TENTH SECTOR OFFICERS' CLUB wasn't crowded. As Commander A-Riman walked into the Senior Officers' dining room, he saw two old acquaintances at one of the tables. He went toward them.

"Mind if I join you?"

They looked up.

"Dalthos! Where'd you come from? Thought you were over in Seventeen."

A-Riman grabbed a chair, pulling it out.

"Just reporting for duty," he said as he sat down. "I'm the new CAC Group Commander."

Veldon Bolsem looked at him quizzically.

"Heard you had a little trouble over a runaway warp," he said. "What'd they do, damp your beams for a while?"

"No, they decided I wasn't at fault." A-Riman grinned. "I requested transfer to Criminal Apprehension."

Bolsem cocked one eyebrow up and the other down. Then, tilting his head to one side, he examined A-Riman carefully.

"Something wrong with my hearing lately," he decided. "I was sure I heard you say you requested transfer."

"I did."

Fleet Commander Plios Knolu placed his elbows on the table.

"How barbarous," he murmured.

He leaned forward, cupped his face in his hands, and fixed A-Riman with a pitying stare.

"Tell me," he asked, "did they beat your brains out with clubs, or did they use surgery?"

A-Riman leaned back, laughing.

"Thought you'd have lost your touch by now," he said. "No, I'm still sane as ever, but . . ."

"Drives ahead," warned Bolsein softly. He started to rise.

A-Riman glanced around to see the Sector Chief walking into the room. He and Knolu got to their feet.

Sector Chief Dal Kun took his seat at the head of the table.

"Your health, Gentlemen," he greeted them. "I see you have already met each other." He looked over the menu card and punched out a selection.

"I've been looking over your records, A-Riman," he continued. "Look good, all of them, up to that space-fold. Board didn't hold you for that, either."

He paused as his dishes rose to the table top. Lifting a cover, he examined the contents of a platter.

"Food Service is in good condition, I see." He transferred a helping to his plate.

"Can't understand how you happened to go into Criminal Apprehension. No promotion there."

A-Riman smiled. "I was about to explain to Bolsein and Knolu as you came in, Sir." He paused, collecting his thoughts.

"I've been doing some studying and thinking on cultural criminology for quite a while, and I've a few theories on preventive work in the new cultures I'd like to try out. There are several systems in this sector that would stand investigation, and . . ."

Dal-Kun laid his utensils down.

"Let's not get in too much of a hurry, Commander. Suppose you turn in some good, routine work for a few cycles. Then we can discuss new theories and innovations." He picked up his fork again.

"We've got a lot of these young, do-nothing drones romping around this sector, getting into scrapes, violating quarantines, creating space hazards, and making a general nuisance of themselves. They'll keep you busy for a while." He grunted angrily.

"Why, right now, you've got five pickup orders on file and those people of yours can't seem to get anywhere with them. Been held

up for over a half cycle. Like action on those before you do anything else."

"I'll get to work immediately, Sir," promised A-Riman. "Can I have Fleet Support where necessary?"

The Sector Chief grunted again. "Don't see why not. Commander Knolu hasn't done anything but routine patrol for two cycles. Do him good to run around a bit and work off some of his fat." He continued with his meal.

Finally, the Chief left the table. Bolsein dialed for another glass of telon and leaned back.

"Don't let the boss worry you too much," he remarked. "He snarls like mad, but he'll back you up all the way long's you're somewhere near center screen."

"Just what's this big, new idea of yours, A Riman?" inquired Knolu.

A-Riman shrugged.

"Either of you ever get a 'cut back,' or a 'destroy' order?"

Knolu nodded. "Sure. Several of them. It's not more'n five cycles since I had to bust a system wide open right in this sector."

"How did you feel about it?"

Knolu shook his head. "How does anyone feel about it? I hated it. But the Council doesn't put out an order like that unless it's been proved necessary. They hate waste and destruction, too."

"Suppose we could figure out a method of eliminating most of this type of destruction?"

Bolsein narrowed his eyes. "It would take a terrible load off the mind of every combat commander in the Guard." He sighed.

"But what can you do? We contact new civilizations as soon as they achieve space travel, and the negotiators fail with a good share of them. Pretty soon, they're too big for their system. They develop some form of warp drive and come busting out, trying to take over the Federation, or a fair sized part of it. Then, we're ordered into action." He closed his eyes.

"Sometimes, we knock their ears back a couple of times, and

they get the idea. Lick their wounds for a while, then decide to go along with the crowd." He held out a hand.

"But again, sometimes it isn't like that at all. And, pretty soon, here comes one of those 'reduce and cut back' things."

"Suppose we contacted them long before they came out into space?"

"Unethical. You know that."

"Is guidance and instruction unethical?"

Knolu sat up sharply. "I think I see what you're driving at," he said, "but who's going to spend his time and effort on a primitive planet, living with primitive people, just so he can teach them? Who's going to patiently keep from giving away anything that might spoil a promising development when it looks as though the primitives'll never get the idea by themselves? And, after all this, what guarantee has he of success?"

A-Riman smiled. "You heard the chief. I've got five pickups in the files. I'll bet, without looking, that at least three of them are for quarantine violations on primitive planets. Now, . . ."

Bolsein interrupted. "All five of 'em are," he grumbled. "We all know about that mess. We have more trouble in this sector with these silly drones violating quarantine than I like to think about. I even had a minor engagement with a bunch of them last cycle." He hesitated.

"Nasty mess," he added. "They'd snarled up the native culture so badly, I doubt they'll ever recover My Captains were so disgusted they didn't pick them up for rehabilitation—just blasted them out of space. I lost a ship over the deal, too."

"There," announced A-Riman, "you had quite a few people who were willing to live with primitives on a primitive planet."

"Sure," grunted Bolsein. "Drones!"

"And what is a drone?"

Knolu leaned back, smiling. "I read the manual once, remember?" He folded his arms.

" 'A drone,' " he quoted in a sing-song voice, " 'is an entity who prefers not to do anything productive. Having acquired the neces-

sary equipment for subsistence, he devotes his time to the pursuit of pleasure, to the exclusion of all other activity.' " He sat forward again.

"I've had a few more thoughts on that subject, though. In my opinion, a drone is an entity which should be picked up for rehabilitation as soon as he betrays his nature." He held up a hand as Bolsein started to speak.

"Oh, I know the book on that one, too. The Ethic says we should not interfere with the chosen course of any citizen so long as he does no harm, commits no unethical act, nor interferes with the legitimate good of another citizen. But this should be an exception.

"Most drones tire of normal pleasure in a few cycles. Within a hundred cycles, they become completely fed up with the most exotic pleasures. About that time, they get into some form of unethical, immoral, or downright criminal activity. Eventually, we have to pick almost all of them up anyway, so why not pick them up right away, before they can do any harm?"

"More than a thousand periods ago," commented A-Riman, "long before the Celstorians burst out into space, my planet had a problem similar to this. To be sure, it was on a much smaller scale, but everything else was scaled down. It wasn't good." He smiled wryly.

"The Governors set up a sort of 'Thought Police,' to combat the evil at its roots. This led to a dictatorship and the civilization of Celstor was set back a thousand planetary cycles. We almost reverted to barbarism and the matter wasn't corrected until a planet-wide uprising overthrew the Board of Governors and destroyed the Police State entirely. Finally, the Republic was founded, but not until a lot of sterile reversions had been set up and overthrown. No, we don't want to amend or correct the Ethic. We merely need to extend its sphere." He looked at Knolu.

"But to get back to my original query. In my opinion, a drone is an entity whose original training was somehow less than completely successful. He is an entity who wishes excitement—action,

if you will—but is unable to accept the discipline that goes with productive work. At our present culture level, subsistence is easy to get, on almost any desired scale. Matter converters allow us to live wherever we are, and live well. Subsistence and property, then, are no incentives. Most of us are so oriented that we get pleasure and reward from accomplishment. The drone, however, hasn't reached that stage of development. It is only when his pursuit of pleasure has led him far out of the normal paths of action that he is a fit subject even for rehabilitation. After rehabilitation, he can be a very useful citizen. Many of them are, you know." He sipped at a glass beside him.

"Now," he went on, "if this undeveloped being we refer to as a drone can enjoy life on a primitive world, why shouldn't a fully developed citizen derive equal enjoyment, plus the pleasure of teaching and developing?"

Knolu laughed. "Thus speaks the 'Fighting Philosopher,'" he said. "Dammit, ever since you published 'Galactic Ethics—an Extension,' you've been living in a cosmos all your own."

"No," denied A-Riman. "I've been fully conscious of the real cosmos. I've been trying to investigate the entire Galactic culture—as a whole, not simply as a combination of sometimes divergent cultures. And I've been trying to solve the problem of these new civilizations, many of which have risen from the ashes of former civilizations which either destroyed themselves or were destroyed by interstellar conflict anywhere from twenty to several hundred periods ago." He hesitated, then went on.

"It takes a long time for a burned out planet to produce new life and a new civilization. It takes a lot longer for a damped sun to come back to life and start reviving its planets." He looked down at the table.

"The Finduran Empire, which one of my Captains took with him into final oblivion, had its beginnings when my father's father was a very young schoolboy, still learning primitive manual writing and struggling with the basic principles of life. These periods of progress, of learning, of long, struggling development, should not

be merely swept away in an instant. They should be conserved—given an opportunity for productive continuation."

"How?" Bolsein leaned forward.

"For short times, say ten cycles or so, I can order my CAC agents in to work on primitive worlds. There's precedent for that. Of course, they have long leaves coming at the end of these tours, but during those work spans, I plan to prove that an impetus can be given to a primitive culture which will cause it to conform to the Galactic Ethic—to modify the Ethic to its own real needs, thus adopting it as its own—and to become predisposed to seek membership in the Galactic Federation when it becomes aware of the existence of such a body." He spread his hands.

"If this works out, I'm sure we can find recruits who will be willing to spend even longer stretches of time as educators and guides. I may even be able to train certain primitives and enlist their aid on their own planets."

"Oh, Brother," murmured Knolu, "try selling that one upstairs."

Bolsein was thoughtful.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "come to think of it, you might have something there. If a flock of drones can get fun out of the primitives, it just might be that productive personnel could stand tours of duty, at that." He grinned.

"Maybe you could even rehab some of the drones and use them to clean up the mess they made for themselves. Maybe they'd get a real kick out of going in and guiding primitive cultures to the point where they'd be willing to exchange technologies and ideas with the rest of the Galaxy."

"Maybe." A-Riman nodded. "At least, they would be able to work it out so that very few new cultures, upon bursting into space, will see any need to go out and form Empires of their own."

"So, what do we do now?" queried Knolu.

"Easy. I've got five pickups on file. The Chief wants 'em cleared immediately, if not sooner. I gather he expects me to take a cycle or so to clean things up. Let me have full co-operation and we can go to work. Might even clean things up in a deci-cycle."

Bolsein shook his head. "I never thought I'd see the day I'd be operating under CAC orders," he complained. "What do you want? Do you need both fleets, or will a few hundred scouts satisfy you?"

3

BEYOND ARGUMENT, Besiro was the most beautiful capital on all the planet. Here was gathered all the talent, all the beauty, all the wit, and most of the wealth of the civilized world.

Here, also, were gathered the most clever, the most experienced, the most depraved thieves and criminals of the planet.

After dark, the Elegants of the Court, the wealthy idlers, the solid merchants of the city, took care to have a trusted bodyguard close to their sides when they ventured abroad.

It was strange, then, that on this night, there was a lone pedestrian in the narrow side street which led to the Guest House of the Three Kings.

The man was dressed expensively and well. His ornate, feathered hat was cocked at exactly the fashionable angle, the foam of lace at his shoulders jutted up and out to the precisely correct width, and the jewels of his shoe buckles and coat buttons reflected the glow of occasional street tapers like miniature suns.

Casually, he strode along the street, casting incurious glances at the shuttered windows of the houses along the way. Finally, he approached the entrance to an alley.

For a moment, he paused, tilting his head in a listening attitude, then he smiled to himself and continued. He brushed a hand lightly against his belt, then took the hilt of his sword in a firm grasp.

II

In the alley, Sailor Klur was giving his last minute instructions in a low tone.

"He's under way again," he said. "Now, One-eye, soon's he heaves into sight, you dive for his feet, see. Me'n the slogger'll finish him off before he gets up." As the footsteps approached, Klur gave One-eye a shove.

"Now," he whispered.

One-eye dove for the glittering shoe buckles.

At the faint commotion, the pedestrian stopped abruptly, then danced back half a pace. One-eye never realized he had failed in his assignment, for the long, sharp sword in the elegantly ringed hand severed his head before he had time to hit the stones of the street. Klur's intended victim pivoted smoothly, meeting the sailor's rush with a well-directed point.

Klur dropped his long knife. For a moment, he looked incredulously at the foppish figure before him, then he collapsed silently to the pavement. He quivered once, then was still.

The victor advanced, forcing Slogger Marl against the wall, the point of his sword making a dent in the man's clothing. Marl sobbed in terror.

"Please, my master, please! They made me do it! I'm a peace-loving man, Sir. I never done nothing like this before. I wouldn't do nothing. On my honor, I wouldn't."

The man with the sword smiled engagingly.

"I can see that," he agreed. "Drop your club, my man."

The club clattered to the alley.

"Now," said the Elegant, "I'm minded to let you go, for you're such a poor thing beside those two valiants who lie there." He dropped the point of the sword a few centimeters.

"Be off," he ordered.

With a gasp of surprised relief, Marl turned to make his way to safer parts.

The sword licked out suddenly, and Marl's sudden, outraged cry became a mere gurgle as flowing blood stopped his voice.

The killer stepped toward the body, glanced disdainfully at its clothing, and shook his head.

"Filthy," he murmured. He walked out to the street, examining the other two. Finally, he decided that Klur's coat was adequately clean. Leaning down, he carefully wiped his sword blade on the skirt of the coat, then restored the weapon to its sheath, carefully adjusted his hat, and sauntered on his way.

Manir Kal, master swordsman, had proved his ability again, and to his own critical satisfaction.

The reports were long and detailed. A-Riman checked them over, rapidly at first, then more slowly, gathering each detail Occasionally, he nodded. Some of these agents were good Others were very good. Any trouble in this operation had originated somewhere other than in the field.

He touched a button on his desk. Nothing happened. He frowned and touched another button. Still nothing happened.

Indignantly, A-Riman examined the call board and punched two more buttons in quick succession. His viewscreen remained dark. His frown deepened.

Finally, he punched at the button marked "conference," then sat back to await developments.

A minute passed, then a light blinked on the desk. As A-Riman pressed the button below the light, the door opened to admit an officer, who took two steps forward, halted, came to rigid attention, saluted, and announced himself.

"Captain Poltar reporting, Sir" He remained at attention.

"Relax, Captain," ordered A-Riman. "Why didn't you answer by viewscreen?"

The captain was still at attention. "The previous Commander wanted personal contact, Sir."

The order to relax penetrated and he quickly took a more comfortable pose.

"Open the door again, then take a chair. I think we're going to have company." A-Riman smiled.

A voice drifted through the open door.

"Oh, new and eager, I suppose. Probably wants us to be sure the guards on that suspect planet are still awake. As though we haven't . . ."

The voice trailed off as the speaker realized the Group Commander's door was open.

Two highly embarrassed officers entered, announced themselves, stood at attention, and waited for the thunders of wrath to descend about their ears.

"Relax, Gentlemen," ordered A-Riman mildly. "We'll have more company in a minute."

Three more officers filed into the room, took two paces, saluted, and announced themselves. A Riman waved a hand.

"Find yourselves some chairs," he told them. He turned to Captain Poltar.

"Are there any more officers present?"

Poltar glanced at the others present in the room, then shook his head.

"No, Sir. The others are off base, checking or investigating."

"Good." A-Riman nodded. "When they come in, have them report to me." He turned to face the group.

"Gentlemen," he began, "this is my first, and very probably, my last staff meeting." He raised a hand.

"No, I don't mean it that way at all. I plan to be here for a good many cycles, but I'm going to see to it that this conference button gets a good coat of corrosion." He turned again to Captain Poltar.

"What were you doing when I buzzed you?"

"Working out the deci-cyclic activity report, Sir."

"It took you over a minute to get here."

"Yes, Sir."

"It'll take you ten or fifteen minutes to get back on your train of thought and get off to a new start when you get back. Right?"

"About that, Sir."

"So, you'll lose at least a quarter of an hour from your work, plus any time we take in this discussion. How long is all that?"

"I expect to lose about an hour and a half, Sir."

A-Riman swept his glance about the group.

"Anyone here think he'll lose any less time than that?"

There was silence.

"So," said A-Riman, "that's what I mean. I punched a button to get a minor bit of information. And there goes nine man-hours of work. More than one day's production from one officer is completely wasted." He frowned at the row of buttons on his desk.

"Mister Jelnar, you're engineering, I believe. Have these things rewired right away. When I call someone, I want to cut in on his viewscreen. There'll be no more of this."

An older man, one of the last to report, rose to his feet. "I'm on my way, Sir." He turned to go out the door, one foot dragging a little.

"Just a minute," said A-Riman. "You were obviously in Combat once. How did you happen to transfer out?"

"Crash landed in a repair ship, Sir. When they got me patched up, a Board decided I was unfit for further combat duty."

"Why didn't you retire?"

"I prefer to be active."

"We'll try to keep you happy." A Riman waved a dismissal.

The Technical Supervisor saluted, swung through the door, and was gone. The Group Commaner gazed after him thoughtfully, then returned his attention to the five remaining officers.

"Maybe, Gentlemen, we're not wasting too much time, at that," he said. "Maybe this is the time for me to go into my own philosophy of operation. I just came from the Combat Arm, Gentlemen. No one forced me into this job. I asked for it because I'm something like Mister Jelnar. I prefer to be active—productively active."

He looked down at the highly polished desk, then focussed his attention on the men before him.

"From now on, we're going to work. There'll be very little time for two-stepping, reporting, and so on. We've got a job to do, and we're going to concentrate on that. When I call one of you, I'll expect an immediate answer by visiscreen—or I'll expect someone

in your office to locate you within a very short time. Then you can call me. If you have any problems, I'll expect a prompt call." He smiled.

"I'll probably be out of my office. I may be at the other end of the sector, but there'll be someone here that'll know where I am and how to get in touch with me."

He picked up the tiny recordings of the pick-up data.

"We have five pick-ups on drones who have violated quarantine on planet five, Sun Gorgon three, number four five seven six, Sector Ten. They are still at large and presumably still on the planet. What's wrong?"

"We have guards staked out all around the sun's system, waiting for them to move, Sir. So far, they haven't made any effort to leave." Captain Poltar looked a little surprised.

"You're sure they are on the planet?"

"Yes, Sir. Definitely. We tracked them in shortly after they made planetfall. Since then, not a dust mote could have gotten out. Our people are keeping constant watch on their actions."

"What's your disposition?"

"It's in the report, Sir," said another officer. "We have ten two-man scouts englobing the planet at close range, with detectors full out. Every time they move, we know it. We have a good many visi-records of their activities."

"That's twenty men on full time duty, just watching a mouse-hole," commented A-Riman. "Why not simply send in five of the scouts, hunt up your people on the planet, and bring them back here?"

Captain Poltar looked shocked.

"Regulations, Sir!"

"Which regulation?"

"Why, I believe it's SGR 344-53-4, Sir. I'll have it checked if you wish."

"Don't bother." A-Riman smiled at him wryly. "I've read it. It says: 'Excepting in cases of extreme emergency, no Guard Unit will make planetfall on any primitive world without prior clear-

ance from higher authority.' Have you checked with the Sector Chief for permission to make planetfall?"

"I haven't, Sir. Commander Redendale said 'Higher Authority' in this case meant the Council, and he wasn't about to contact the Council to cover my people's incompetence. He said they should certainly be able to do a simple thing like bringing the quarry into the open."

The Commander grinned. "He told you, of course, how that was to be done?"

"No, Sir. He said he wasn't going to tell me how to do my job. Said I was supposed to know these things. He just expected me to do it."

A-Riman shook his head, then punched at a sequence of buttons on his desk.

The viewscreen lit up, showing a blue haze which cleared as an alert face appeared. "Admiral's office," said a crisp voice. "Orderly here."

"CAC Group Commander here," he was told. "Let me talk to the Chief."

"Yes, Sir." The orderly reached forward and his image was abruptly blanked out. A few seconds passed, then Sector Chief Dal Kun's heavy face appeared.

"Yes, Commander, what is it?"

"Sir, I would like permission to land ten of my people on a primitive planet."

"Why?"

"I have five pick up orders, Sir. The subjects have been located, and I'd like to land agents to bring them in."

"When were they located?"

"Half a cycle ago, Sir."

The Sector Commander's face whitened slightly, then its normal silvery gray became suffused with a pale bluish tinge.

"Why," he demanded angrily, "wasn't I contacted for this permission half a cycle ago?"

"I don't know of my own knowledge, Admiral," replied A-Riman.

"Find out, Commander. Call me back with the answer within an hour."

The Sector Chief leaned forward.

"Go in and get those drones—now. I want an apprehension report on them within ten days." The screen became blank.

A-Riman looked up.

"Gentlemen, you heard the conversation. Now you know where we find 'Higher Authority.' The Admiral said ten days. I know that doesn't leave too much time to comb an entire planet and locate five men." He paused, looking about the group.

"But I'm going to make it interesting. If our people are any good, and if your reports are at all accurate, we've got men who know all about our subjects. I think we've got good men out in the field. Tell them I want to see those drones tomorrow, right after lunch—alive."

The five officers looked at each other. Then they looked at the new Group Commander.

"Tomorrow, Sir?" asked one, "right after lunch?"

A-Riman nodded. "Alive," he emphasized. "I don't care how you do it. If you wish, and if your men can, you may turn the planet inside out. Use all the men you need, but bring them in." He smiled sourly.

"We'll pick up the pieces and clean up the mess later. Now, let's get at it. You go to work while I explain to the Chief why this wasn't reported to him long ago." He touched the buttons again.

"This meeting's adjourned."

4

MASTER SEARCH TECHNICIAN GALEN KEMBAR looked unhappily at the communicator.

"Half a cycle, I'm hanging around this rock heap, watching a bunch of monkeys swagger around. They won't let me touch 'em. I can't just go in, fiddle around for a couple of days, then pick them up. No! I sit here, rigging gadgets to let me watch their antics." He turned to his companion, who merely grinned.

"Go ahead, grin, you prehistoric Dawn-man. It ain't funny."

Scout Pilot first class Dayne stretched his long arms.

"So? They gave you a go-ahead. You can go in. What's wrong with that?"

Kembar wagged his head. "Half a cycle, that's what's wrong. For half a cycle, they can't get off their fat and come up with orders. Then, they want me to bring 'em in for lunch tomorrow." He glanced over the pilot's shoulder at the clock.

"Well, set her down just outside of the city and we'll get on with it. Tell the rest of the section to meet us in that park just north of town."

Dayne nodded and turned to his controls.

"They're using the old style Morhkan body shields, aren't they?" he asked over his shoulder.

"That's right." Kembar opened a locker, pulling out equipment and clothing. "Set up your neutralizer now. The others can carry projectors, just in case."

The Guest House of the Three Kings had never been an elaborate place, nor was it in the best section of Besiro. It had become

the haunt of many of the capitol's Elegants due to some chance whim of some leader of fashion. An astute proprietor had held the favor by quickly hiring excellent help, by stocking the best wines, and by procuring the best in cuisine, while still managing to retain the casual atmosphere of a small, slightly down-at-the-heels public drinking place.

In the guest room, long wooden benches lined the walls, which were pierced by ancient, leaded windows, whose pressure-bowed panes looked out on a plaza. Before the benches were scrubbed wooden tables that had never known covering.

The center of the room was normally kept clear, so that the waiters could move more quickly to their customers. To be sure, there were times when this open space was used by the customers for sword-play, but this practice was frowned upon. Master Korno didn't like bloodstains marring the scrubbed whiteness of his floor.

Outside the Guest Hall, in the large entry, Manir Kal met his friends. Rhandi was teasing one of the waitresses, while Kem-dor looked on with tolerant amusement.

"Where's Bintar?" queried Kal.

Kem-dor gestured. "Kitchen, of course. He wanted the roast done just so."

Rhandi gave the waitress a slight shove and she fled through a door.

"I'm getting tired of this place," he yawned. "It's turning into mere, dull routine. How about hunting up something with a little more life to it?"

Kal shook his head. "Have to wait a while," he explained. "Malon says they're still all over the system, watching. Better not move till they give it up. If we hit space now, they'll be all over us." He frowned, looking at the bare hallway.

Kem-dor nodded. "I suppose you're right," he agreed, "but there has to be something to beat these silly games in their casinos and clubs. I'm turning into a money-making machine and it's beginning to bore me."

"Try their business houses," suggested Rhandi. "Might be some life showing there."

Kem-dor snorted. "Any idiot can solve their financial structure," he said. "Tried it myself, of course. Oh, their elementary tricks were amusing for a while, but . . ." He waved a jeweled hand.

"I know what you mean," said Kal. "The bravos here are full of rabbit blood, too." He moved toward a door.

"Well, we can go in and get a drink, anyway."

As he entered the Guest Room, Manir Kal started for the usual table, over in the far corner. There was a large man sitting on the bench. Kal awarded him a casual inspection.

He was a tall, lean individual—well enough dressed, but not in the precise height of style. Probably some rustic landowner in for the carnival, decided the swordsman. He walked over to the table.

"Sorry, fellow," he remarked. "You're in my place. Have to move."

The man looked up, making no effort to rise from the bench.

"Plenty more tables here," he remarked. "I've been here for some time. Like it here." He gestured at the table next to his.

"Here, try this spot."

Kal smiled inwardly Perhaps this one would provide some sport, at that.

"Perhaps you didn't quite understand me," he said evenly. "You are sitting in the place I am accustomed to occupy. I'll thank you to move, and immediately."

The other picked up his glass and sipped from it.

"As I said," he remarked, setting the glass down, "I've been here quite a while. I like it here." He looked Manir Kal over carefully.

"You look smart enough to find your way to another table, all by yourself."

Someone at another table laughed.

Manir Kal's face flushed. He swept a hand past his belt, then snatched the stranger's glass up and dashed it at the man's face.

The rustic vaulted over the table so rapidly he seemed to float. A hard fist struck Manir Kal in the nose. As he staggered back, a

backhanded cuff sent him reeling against a table. For an instant, rage flooded through him. He snatched his sword out.

"I'll cut you to ribbons for this," he snarled.

The stranger had a sword, too.

"Come and try," he invited.

Korno interposed his fat body between the two disputants.

"Now, Gentlemen," he protested, "there's a . . ."

Impatiently, Kal poked him with his sword.

"Out of the way, fool," he growled, "before we use your body for a fencing mat."

With a shriek, Korno leaped out of the center of the room, then stood and rubbed his injured posterior as he watched the fight.

The blades slithered against each other as the duelists felt each other out, then Kal tried a quick thrust. It was parried and the riposte nearly threw Kal out of balance. He felt a surge of enthusiasm. At least, this one was less awkward than most.

He wove a bewildering net of thrusts and counterthrusts, then moved in with his favorite trick, a disarm he had learned long ago.

Somehow, it didn't work. He found his blade borne to the floor. Quickly, he swung it up again, closing in to avoid a thrust.

"Have to do much better than that," laughed the stranger in Kal's native language. "Much, much better."

Manir Kal started to answer, then the real significance of the words struck him.

"You're . . ."

With an easy shove, the stranger pushed Kal back. Casually, he beat the swordsman's blade aside, piercing his shoulder with a straight thrust.

"That's right," he said apologetically, "I'm afraid I am."

"Hey," protested someone. "The Old Man said to bring 'em in alive."

"I know," Kal's assailant sheathed his sword. "But he didn't say anything about minor cuts and bruises."

For a heartbeat, Manir Kal stood, looking at the man who had

so casually brushed his swordsmanship aside. Then a haze closed in on him. He slipped to the floor.

His companions started for the door, but were met by several grim looking individuals with small objects in their hands—familiar objects.

"Screens down," ordered one of these. As the three hesitated in confusion, he added, "Don't tempt us, children."

The large duelist hoisted Manir Kal to his shoulder and started for the door.

"All right, fellows," he said, "let's go." He turned to look at Korno.

"We're going to take this man to a doctor, Innkeeper," he said. "His friends will be going with us."

A-Riman sat back in his chair. For the moment, his work was done and nothing remained outside of purely routine matters, which he had no intention of considering just yet. He yawned and glanced at his watch. It was just about time for someone to come up with a report on those five drones.

"Wonder what action they've taken so far?" he asked himself. He leaned forward and touched a button.

An enlisted man's face showed in the screen for an instant, then blanked out. Captain Poltar appeared.

"Yes, Sir?"

"How about those five pick-ups?"

The Captain glanced down at his desk. "They're being interrogated right now, Sir," he explained. "We planned to bring them to you after lunch as you ordered."

A Riman raised his eyebrows. "Who brought them in, and when?"

"Lieutenant Norkal's patrol was on duty, Sir. Sergeant Kembar took his section in and made the pick-up. He came in early this morning."

"Very good," nodded the Commander. "I like operations that come off ahead of schedule." He glanced at his watch again.

"I think I can wait a little before lunch. Have the sergeant bring them here." He shut off the screen and sat back, waiting.

The door light flashed, and as A-Riman touched the button, Sergeant Kembar walked in and saluted. He was in a fresh uniform, his insignia gleaming like a new rainbow against the dead blackness of the cloth. He stepped to the side of the door and drew his sidearm.

"Send 'em in," he ordered.

Five disheveled individuals filed in, followed by a pair of neatly uniformed guards, who quickly herded them into a line facing the Group Commander.

A-Riman looked over the tableau, then laughed.

"Fine, useful bunch of citizens," he remarked. "Here, we have a real credit to the Galactic Culture."

Sergeant Kembar looked critically at the prisoners.

"Things like these will happen, Sir," he commented expressionlessly.

The Group Commander's amusement evaporated.

"Unfortunately, Sergeant," he replied, "they do." He pointed at Manir Kal.

The former swordsman of Besiro had a fresh bandage on his shoulder. His arm was carried in a sling, but he attempted to hold himself with something of his former swagger.

"What's this one good for?"

"It picks fights." Sergeant Kembar smiled faintly.

"Has it found anyone it can whip yet?"

The sergeant's smile broadened.

"With the help of a body shield, it can best almost any primitive swordsman," he answered. "Of course, its knowledge of the finer points of fencing is pretty limited, but it knows which end of the sword is sharp—now." He glanced pointedly at the bandage.

Manir Kal looked angrily over at the sergeant, started to speak, then looked at his feet.

"Well," prompted A-Riman.

"He had a body shield, too," stated Kal.

A-Riman looked at the sergeant, who grinned.

"Naturally, Sir. It was business with me, and the neutralizer they put on him didn't affect my shield at all. But the subject found out about that after it got pinked, fainted, and was revived on the scout ship. It couldn't direct its blade close enough to me to find my shield during the little tussle." He examined his knuckles reflectively.

"It leads with its nose, too," he added.

Manir Kal was stung. "I'm a Galactic Citizen," he stated. "I resent being referred to as an 'it!' "

Dalthos A-Riman looked at him sternly. "You gave up your citizenship rights when you made illegal planetfall on a primitive world," he said coldly. "You are now merely a rehabilitation subject, regarded as being of insufficient competence to speak for yourself." He waved a hand at Rhandi.

"This one?"

The sergeant made a grimace of disgust.

"It runs after females," he growled. He looked down the line of prisoners.

"This one eats," he added, pointing. "It has a little knowledge of food preparation." He shifted his attention.

"With the aid of a computer, this one can solve elementary permutations and possibilities. It fancies itself as a gambler and financier." The sergeant paused, then pointed again.

"Here is the talented one. It can actually make planetfall with a pleasure cruiser."

Malon looked at him sneeringly. "I managed to evade you," he pointed out.

The sergeant was unperturbed.

"The subject ship headed in for planetfall after giving a false course plan and sending out spurious breakdown data," he said. "We could have blasted, of course, but we were ordered not to destroy unless necessary. We have had all five of these subjects under close surveillance ever since their landing." He smiled.

"Dayne had very little trouble in hooking their sportster out of its nest with a tractor. Didn't even shake up the pilot."

A-Riman nodded. "These are typical drones?"

"Yes, Sir. Some others engage in other forms of amusement, some show a little more imagination, but these five are run-of-the-lot."

"I see." A-Riman got to his feet.

"Take them out, tag them, and ship them to Aldebaran Base. In the future, simply pick up any criminal drones you may find. Ship them to Rehabilitation with suitable tags, and make out a report. I've seen enough of them." He started toward the door.

"I'm going to lunch now, Sergeant," he added. "Be ready to report to me with your section when I return."

He went out of the building, and made his way to the club.

The Sector Chief was halfway through his lunch when A-Riman walked into the dining room.

With a quick, "By your leave, Sir," the Group Commander slid into a chair and consulted the menu. As he dialed his choice, Dal-Kun cleared his throat.

"Hate to spoil your appetite, Commander," he said, "but what's being done about those five drones of yours?"

A-Riman glanced at his watch. "They should be about ready for shipment to Aldebaran by now, Sir. The reports are being prepared for submission to your office."

Dal-Kun speared a morsel of food. "Very good, Commander," he said, "I'm . . ."

He looked up.

"You picked them up in less than one day? What's been going on for the past five decicycles?"

A-Riman shook his head. "I reported the situation to you, Sir. The scouts were forbidden to make planetfall until yesterday. They had their subjects under extremely close observation and were able to bring them in immediately they were granted permission to act."

"I suppose they made a mess on the planet. How long will it

take you to clean up and prevent a stir for the planetary historians to pick over for the next few hundred cycles?"

"The pick-up created very little disturbance." A-Riman frowned. "But I'm not sure yet about the effects of the drones' stay. It may take us as much as two decicycles for complete cover-up."

Bolsein and Knolu jerked their heads up as the Sector Chief slammed both hands on the table.

"Commander," he demanded, "are you giving me a sweet story?" He directed a searching gaze at his subordinate. "Commander Redendale always insisted that it would normally take several cycles to cover up a planetfall by Guard units."

A-Riman nodded. "Sometimes it does," he admitted. "It depends on the ability of the personnel involved in the landing." He touched the side of his face.

"I inherited some very good people from Commander Redendale," he added. "So good that they went into this planet without more than ten or fifteen people seeing them. They staged a minor barroom brawl, picked up their subjects, and were gone without any contact with the planetary authorities." He let his hand flip out.

"The subjects' ship and its pilot came along at the end of a tractor. No native saw that, of course. Our men kept visibility screened off." He looked across the room thoughtfully.

"I have ordered the sergeant in charge of the section to report to me this afternoon," he went on. "I believe he and his entire section are due for a commendation on this operation. When I get through congratulating them, I'll order them back in to clear up the rather unsavory mess our subjects left for them."

Dal-Kun grunted. "You didn't inherit anything from Redendale but trouble," he announced. "Those people of yours either just came in from other sectors or were trained by previous commanders." The Sector Chief examined his plates distastefully, then punched a button for their removal.

"Redendale was here for less than a cycle," he continued. "I had him transferred because I wasn't sure he was the man for the job.

Now, I'm almost sorry I didn't keep him for a Board." He leaned back, folding his arms.

"I seem to remember, Commander, that you said something about some experiment you wanted to make. As long as you can keep up with your routine like this, and you don't break any regulations, go ahead. Do you need any clearances?"

"Yes, Sir," A-Riman told him. "I need planetfall clearance and at least a three cycle occupation clearance for personnel on a primitive planet."

"For what reason?"

"General rehabilitation, Sir. The culture I have in mind is still in its infancy. Observer reports show that it's not a particularly desirable culture as it is, and I'd like to try a rehabilitation program.

"Extrapolation indicates that this civilization will either destroy itself in the near future, or force us to destroy it within five or six periods. I'm sure, though, that it can be rebuilt into a useful, law abiding culture, with abilities that'll make it a valuable addition to the Federation." He placed his hand on the table.

"We can do this without changing the basic characteristics of the culture in question. The undesirable elements aren't basic, they're simply superimposed—right now. And I'm convinced it's our ethical duty to correct the situation."

Dal-Kun looked at him thoughtfully. "I've read your 'Fighting Philosophy,'" he said, "but this is something new, isn't it?" He drummed on the table.

"Where are you going to get the personnel you'll need?"

"I can use existing CAC personnel for the first few cycles, Sir, and perhaps borrow a few men from the fleets. After that, if the experiment shows promise, I'll request additional agents."

"Do you think you can get Operations to hold still for further personnel requisitions? You're a little fat right now."

"I know that, Sir. But I hope to be able to show the desirability of my experiment before the ten cycle survey. That's four cycles

away now, and I should be able to establish a demonstrable trend in three."

"It'll be intensive work." The Sector Chief shook his head slowly. "About a thousand days to make noticeable changes in a planetary culture that's more than that many cycles old." He looked at A-Riman searchingly.

"Wonder if your people can swing that one."

He looked away again.

Suddenly, he brought his hand down on the table.

"Go ahead, Commander, try it. If you can show me convincing trends within four cycles, I'll keep the survey people off your back for another ten and let you build a real case."

He looked at the three officers for a moment, then abruptly got up and left the room.

Veldon Bolsein exhaled explosively.

"Brother," he said, "what a bill of goods." He looked at A-Riman, smiling crookedly.

"You better make good on this one, old philosopher. If you muff it, your name's not even 'space dust.' "

Knolu grinned. "The man's right, the man is. Slip up, and the Old Man'll feed you to the matter converter in tiny chunks. Then he'll re-synthesize you to make a new pair of shoes."

A-Riman nodded. "I know that," he told them. "I came here to try this, though, and I'm going to do it." He eyed his friends seriously for a moment.

"If I mess this up," he added, "the Old Man'll have to do some delicate work with a filter to find enough of me to feed the converter with." He started for the door.

"See you," he called back. "I've got me a job of work."

5

QUEL-TZE, high priest of Gundar, Lord of the Sky, stood at the altar atop the temple at Dolezin. He looked skyward, estimating the time left before Gundar should mount to his zenith. It was nearly time for the sacrifice.

Gundar, the small, yellow sun, was doing his part. He shone brightly out of a cloudless sky, lighting up the spectacle. Dazzlingly, the large altar of white, polished stone reflected the light, causing the under priests to avert their eyes from its surface. The shadow of the great ring atop the pinnacle of the temple was black against the smooth stone of the altar stage. Slowly, it approached the altar itself.

Quel-tze glanced about him at his priests, making a last minute check to see that all was in order. The five were at their proper stations, their regalia in proper order and reflecting the light of Gundar with the proper blazing glory. One held the large golden bowl, another the long sacrificial knife. The others were properly placed to strap the sacrifice into position with a minimum of lost motion and time.

The high priest looked out over the city, where a sea of upturned faces watched and waited. It was well. All the populace were present.

The shadow of the ring started to mount the altar and Quel-tze made a sign behind his back, reaching to accept the knife with his other hand.

A sonorous chant rose from the level below and before the altar. The walls of this level, cut into a reflector, projected the chant out over the waiting people and prevented more than a low murmur from reaching the priests at the altar.

The Hymn to the Sun flooded the city of Dolozin to the exclusion of all other sounds.

From the shadowed doorway behind the altar, two powerfully built priests came, holding the arms of a feebly protesting girl. Two more priests followed them. As she looked at the waiting altar, the girl's eyes widened and her mouth opened. She tried to turn away, but the priests held her motionless.

"Silence, my child," instructed Quel-tze. "You are being honored beyond all other women of the city."

"I don't want to be honored," sobbed the girl. "I want to go home."

The high priest smiled thinly. "That cannot be, my daughter," he said. "Soon, you will go to join great Gundar, that he may look upon your spirit and find it good."

He nodded to two priests behind the girl, who quickly removed the ceremonial kilt and the heavy breastplates and collar she had been wearing. They laid these aside and, grasping her ankles, they assisted the two who held her arms as they laid her quickly on the altar.

The priests waiting at the altar quickly adjusted straps to wrists and ankles so the girl lay helpless on the stone, facing the sky and Gundar, the lord thereof.

She closed her aching eyes against the glare and screamed.

Below, the chanting voices harmonized with the scream, the basses weaving a slow, rhythmic pattern with the high, terrorized ululations.

The shadow of the great ring crept slowly along the girl's body, the brilliant disc of light within it approaching the breast.

Quel-tze raised both hands and gazed upward in a gesture of supplication. Below, the chorus chanted.

"Grant, O Great Gundar, that our crops be fertile, that our ventures never fail."

The disc of light crept to the breasts. Quel-tze brought the knife down in a swift arc which ended at the center of the bright disc. Quickly, he rotated the blade. There was a faint, tearing sound and

the body of the girl twitched, then lay quietly. Now, the sound of the chant softened—was still. Brilliant red flowed along channels in the altar, to pour into a chalice.

Quel-tze reached down and grasped the still feebly pulsing heart of the "Harvest Maiden," cut it free with a few practiced slashes of the knife, and held it aloft for a moment before he handed it to one of the attendant priests. He moved forward, circling the altar, to stand before a sound reflector, then held his hands up once more.

"The Harvest Maiden has gone to the realm of the Lord of the Sky," he declaimed. "Her pure spirit will assure us of plenty in the year to come."

A sigh arose from the onlookers below. One by one, they started forward, to enter the temple.

On the outskirts of the crowd, an elderly man slowly led his heartbroken wife away.

Quel-tze turned and made his way down the stairs to his apartment. It would be a short time before his presence was required in the halls of the temple, and he needed rest. As usual, he felt tired—emotionally spent—after the exhilaration of the sacrificial moment. This girl, he suddenly realized, had been of striking beauty.

He shrugged. There were plenty of these.

He made a gesture of dismissal to his attendant priests and entered his rooms. He closed the door and took a few steps toward his sleeping room.

"Well," commented a voice, "our boy's come to us, all in one piece."

Quel-tze turned to the door, to find himself facing a man who blocked his way. He was a large man, dressed in unrelieved black, from which blazed small insignia. In his hand, he held a small instrument.

Somehow, the manner in which he held this unfamiliar object made Quel-tze realize that this was a weapon which could easily prevent any effort of his to either escape or attack. He turned again.

Now, where before had been nothing but vacant space, stood

another man. This one was dressed in the ceremonial robes of the high priest of Gundar—Quel-tze's robes. He held another of the small objects.

"They can't talk to you here," this man said, "so I'm going to stand in for you while you get a new education and instruction in your future duties."

For an instant, Quel-tze's attention was held by the glow coming from the object in the pseudo high priest's hand. Then all became dark.

He regained consciousness slowly. There was no pain—no uncomfortable sensation. He was simply aware of the sounds of conversation about him, then of light, then of straps which held him in a chair. Furiously, he strained at these bonds.

"You'll all suffer for this," he threatened. "When I am missed, the temple guards will search, and . . ."

He was interrupted. A man in black uniform came into his field of vision.

"Afraid you're wrong, baby," he said. "First, you won't be missed. Your stand-in knows all the patter. Second, your world is far from us now, and no one there can do anything here."

He stepped aside, waving to a screen which lit, to show points of light in a black void.

"That little one over there," he explained, pointing, "is your Lord of the Sky. To us, it's just another minor star."

He turned again, smiling at Quel-tze.

"And, third," he added, "your re-education is about to begin." Again, he waved toward the screen.

"Many thousands of periods ago," said a calm voice, "suns shone on their planets much as they do now. The planets were hardly more than cinders, but on scores of them were the faint stirrings of life."

Quel-tze felt a strong mental compulsion which forced him to look at the screen closely, to become part of it, to take up every bit of the offered information and absorb it into his awareness. Somehow, he found himself accepting the fact that the points of

light in the void were suns—that each of these had its own worlds circling it, many of which were greater than the world he had known.

On the screen, the field of view narrowed to show a single sun with its planets. Then one planet gradually filled the screen, the details of its surface becoming plain to see.

Step by step, the lesson continued. Quel-tze saw the beginnings of life. He saw the rising of life forms, then the beginnings of civilization. He was fed. He slept. The lessons continued.

Civilizations rose and flourished before his eyes. Some declined and fell. The voice pointed out the reasons for their successes and their failures. As Quel-tze watched, a culture reached peaks of technical and mechanical ability far beyond his comprehension.

The people of this planet traveled into space, reached for the stars, then, turning again to their old, internecine struggles, destroyed the results of centuries of slow development in a few short, blazing weeks. A few dazed survivors sadly picked over the wreckage of their once powerful and luxurious world.

Their descendants, reverting to savagery, slowly began the laborious climb to civilization.

Quel-tze shuddered—tried to shut the images from his mind. But always at the threshold of his consciousness was the inaudible but powerful command.

"Absorb. Learn. For only by learning can you survive."

On the screen, the civilization was rebuilding, its development accelerating as it progressed. Again, the people of this planet reached to space—successfully, this time. Other solar systems were reached.

Interstellar conquest began and Quel-tze watched the building of an interstellar empire. Also, he saw destruction as civilizations crumbled to ruins, then to complete obliteration before the weapons of implacable conquerors.

The tone of the instruction changed. Before, the emphasis had been on the technologies of the subject civilizations. This second phase of his instruction was focused upon the growth of custom—

of ethics—of law. Again, the civilizations were on the march, their legal, ethical, and religious structures laid bare for observation.

Cultures were traced, their oscillations—from high, supermorality to definite immorality, to high morality again—becoming obvious under the quiet analysis of the teacher.

Some of these plans for living led to decline and fall—others to sudden, blazing extinction. Others were successful—still extant in the Galaxy.

The basic framework of the Galactic Federation was exposed and Quel-tze saw how multitudes of worlds, inhabited by varying peoples of widely varying origins, differing physical shapes, bodily chemistry, and mentalities could live in harmony and complete tolerance.

On one world, he was shown a quiet, pastoral people, who tended their own business. Here was a civilization, fully aware of the high technology surrounding it, which preferred to pursue its own quiet ways of life. And Quel-tze realized that in the eyes of the rest of the Federation, this technically backward world was respected and recognized as an equal. In the Council, delegates from this world were received with respect when they voiced opinions.

Further, it was pointed out, the people of this world were by no means all indigenous. Numbers of them were natives of other worlds far removed in space, and of far different cultural pattern. They had come here because the ways of life were suited to them.

Also, Quel-tze discovered, there were many cases wherein the ships flitting about in space actually formed cultures of their own. There were Federation members who rarely set foot upon any planet, and then not for long. Yet these wanderers, the Free Spacers, were regarded as equals. They had their voice in the Council and contributed to the welfare and development of the Galactic Civilization in their own way.

The screen cleared. Again, dead planets circled a brilliant sun. Life stirred. Life forms grew and developed. One of these achieved

reason, became dominant on the planet, and formed a culture and a civilization which slowly grew, rose, and flourished in its way.

Quel-tze stirred uneasily. This was a familiar pattern. Using his newly given knowledge, he examined the ethical structure, realizing how very familiar it really was.

A religion came into power, superseding the power of the state and people. The sun became the "Lord of all Creation." Ceremonies were instituted and gradually, the priesthood of the Sun took over the reins of actual power, though none outside the temple realized what was actually happening.

Quel tze shook his head sadly. He had seen similar patterns in previously analyzed civilizations, and the result had been invariable —decline, failure, fall or destruction by another, more effective culture.

He could even predict the decision point, where the culture would have a possible choice between regeneration and eventual extinction. And it was close.

He squirmed in his chair as the account went on. A minor government official was proving to be unexpectedly and annoyingly honest. Despite veiled warnings from visiting priests and from some of his own associates, he refused steadfastly to condone and allow certain lucrative practices. Finally, the temple acted. The daughter of the annoying officer was chosen for the annual sacrifice.

As the ceremony went on, the analytic voice detailed motives, reasons, probable consequences. Other, similar situations were recalled. Quel-tze shuddered. Then, as the climax of the ceremony occurred, he strained at his bonds for a moment, then collapsed in his chair.

Two men hurried to his side. One applied a small instrument to his throat, listened for a moment, then nodded.

"Close, Sir," he remarked. "But he's still with us."

He made an injection in the high priest's arm and stood back.

Again, consciousness slowly returned to Quel-tze. This time, the room was silent. For a moment, madness crept into his eyes, then

he sat back quietly and waited for the screen to light again. Nothing happened.

"You may continue with my education, Gentlemen," he said evenly. "I am ready."

The black uniformed psychologist came into his field of vision. He looked closely at the captive, then smiled at him. Bending over him, he loosened the confining straps.

"I think you are, Quel-tze," he said. "Would you like to meet your fellow students?"

Quel-tze nodded wordlessly, then stood, flexing his muscles. He looked about the room for a moment, then followed the guardsman into the next compartment, where several people waited. One man came forward as the priest entered.

"Quel-tze," he said, holding out his hand. "A while ago, I hated you. When they brought you aboard, I begged them to give you to me. Now . . . Well, we must work together."

Quel-tze raised his own hand. For a moment, the two men stood, hands on each other's shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Tal-Quor," said the priest. "I didn't know better then."

"I was equally at fault," the other admitted. "Had it been someone other than my own daughter, I would have remained undisturbed."

A trill of silvery laughter sounded through the room.

"It was all illusion," said a girlish voice. "This year, the Harvest Maiden was a large swamp lizard."

6

Someone called "Attention." Sector Chief Dal-Kun walked to the front of the room, looked at the officers before him, then nodded.

"At ease, Gentlemen," he ordered. "We seldom have a full staff meeting here, but Commander A-Riman has a report which should be of interest to all of us. I would like to have comments when it is complete.

"Commander A-Riman."

The CAC Commander faced the group.

"As many of you know," he began, "CAC has been engaged in an experiment for the past four cycles. The Criminal Apprehension personnel, as well as quite a few Combat personnel, have become extremely interested in this experiment. Most of these people have worked much more than normal time on it." A-Riman nodded toward an elderly officer.

"With the co-operation of the Sector Comptroller," he went on, "we have written off a good deal of our time to training. We think this time has not been wasted and that it was legitimate training, even though a little out of the usual line. We also believe that the results obtained are well worth the time spent. I believe you gentlemen will agree after reviewing this report." He bowed slightly and took a seat.

The lights dimmed and the viewscreen lit. A solar system appeared as seen from an approaching ship. One planet crept to the center of the screen and expanded. The voice of an observer came from the speaker.

"This is the fourth planet of sun Gorgon four, number six two nine, Tenth Sector. Life has been in existence here for at least a thousand periods. The age of the present dominant civilization is estimated at three periods."

The screen closed in, to show details of cities. Conversations between members of the populace became audible, translated to Intergalactic. The actions and motives of officials were shown.

The gradual submergence of the individual's rights, coupled with the appearance of cruelty as a governmental policy became apparent. Coupled with this, was shown an acceptance of immorality and of human sacrifice. Finally, detailed scenes of the 'Harvest Maiden' sacrifice were shown. The voice broke in again.

"As can be seen from these indicators, this civilization has a high probability of failure. It will stagnate and eventually be eliminated, either by another civilization not yet formed, or by Federation Council orders, if it should manage to progress far enough to warrant such attention." There was a pause.

The screen showed an overall view of a large city, its buildings gleaming in the sun.

"This is the civilization picked for initial experiment," added the voice.

The abduction of Quel-tze and his companions was shown. Scenes of their training were shown in flashes, then their return to their own world came on the screen.

The reforms instituted by these people began to appear. One scene featured Quel-tze as he faced six councilors of the Kelmir Empire. A councilor was speaking.

"This tampering with the time-honored ceremonies of our religion will not be tolerated," he announced. "You are undermining the basic institutions of the State."

"I thought I was the high priest," objected Quel-tze mildly. "It is my duty to decide on matters of ritual and ceremony."

The councilor looked at him scornfully. "You should know, priest, that your temple has always been the creature of the State. We give the orders. You merely furnish the cloak of sanctity."

"This borders upon sacrilege."

"This is merely practical government," snorted the councilor. "Now, for the last time, will you accept our nomination for the Harvest Maiden?"

Quel-tze smiled gently. "As I said before," he told the man, "the Harvest Ceremony is being changed to conform with the ceremony of many years ago, before the age of immorality and cruelty began. The Altar has been removed."

The councilor's mouth tightened. "Then you force us to act," he said with a gesture of finality.

For a moment, he stood, looking at the high priest. Then he turned.

"Guards," he called, "arrest this man for treason."

A group of armed priests stepped into the room. The councilors looked at them in bewilderment.

"These," explained Quel-tze calmly, "are my guards. Yours are in the temple dungeons, where you will soon join them." He looked at the leader of the priestly warriors.

"Take them below, Qual-mar. They will await a Temple trial for sacrilege."

The six councilors blanched. "The Emperor . . ." one of them quavered.

Again, Quel-tze smiled. "The Emperor," he told him, "is receiving a priestly delegation. I might add that it is a far more effective delegation than this of yours. No threats will be made, no violence will be offered, but tomorrow, the Emperor will find it expedient to appoint new councilors."

Further scenes showed the operations of the new Imperial Council. The final scene showed the Harvest Maiden, standing proudly atop Dolozin Temple.

She had reason to be proud, for she had been chosen from all the young girls of the nation as the most beautiful, the most talented of all. By her side, stood a prize draft animal. In her hands, she held the best of the year's crop.

Below her, the priests chanted. It was the same Hymn to the Sun, but the acoustics of the Temple levels had been changed and the clear, high voice of the Harvest Maiden could be plainly heard, leading the melody.

The voice broke in again.

"Cultural indicators now point toward probable success for this civilization. Considerable supervision must be given for at least a period, but it is believed that the culture will now progress to become a valued member of the Federation."

The lights brightened. Commander A-Riman stood again.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is the report on the first four cycles of this experiment. You have seen the principles used and most of the basic steps. Of course, we forced this process somewhat to

prove our point in a short space of time. And sometimes, things got a little violent. I believe further activity of this nature should take place at a more leisurely pace, but we think we have shown desirable results. Are there any comments?"

Geronar Keldon, the Sector Comptroller, stood.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I will admit that I authorized the utilization of Commander A-Riman's personnel in this experiment with some misgivings. Now that I've seen the results, I have no further objections to continuous operation of this nature. In fact, I should say the experiment should be given all possible support."

Another officer came to his feet.

"I have only one question," he said quietly. "There's ample proof that this experimental culture would have come to destruction. I'll agree with that. But how about this supervision? Will we get anything more than a somewhat inferior copy of some previous Galactic culture?"

A-Riman smiled as he got to his feet.

"I'd hoped someone would ask that question," he remarked.

"It's a valid question, and one that occurred to us. And we've covered the possibility. The total extent of our influence is to keep cultural activity within the bounds of the Galactic Ethic." He smiled.

"I think you'll agree this leaves almost infinite space for both cultural and technological variation."

Another officer came to his feet.

"In other words," he said, "any development they come up with will have to be purely their own?"

"That's the way it is." A-Riman nodded. "We're giving them nothing in the way of technology—not even a suggestion here or there. Our only influence is in the field of social development. And even in that, we're letting them form their own theories. All we do is say 'No' when they start to cross into dangerous ethics areas."

The questioner nodded. "I see," he said. "Sounds good. Why didn't someone try it before?"

Several other officers added their remarks. Most of them were

laudatory. A few expressed regret that they had not been involved in the operation. Finally, Dal-Kun got to his feet.

"Well," he remarked, looking about the room, "it seems that the report has met with general favor. I would like formal reports of your reactions, along with any suggestions for improvement. I believe that this report, with recommendations, should be presented to Stellar Guard Operations for consideration." Again, he looked around the room.

"This meeting is adjourned."

A-Riman walked back to check the packing of the tapes, then went back to the CAC building. His secretary looked up as he came in.

"Captain Poltar called, Sir," he said.

"Oh? Get him back on."

The Captain's face mirrored secret amusement as he appeared on the screen.

"The new personnel just came in, Sir," he announced. "Do you want to see them now?"

A-Riman dropped the report cassettes into their cases. "Send them in," he instructed. "How do they look to you?"

"Pretty good, Sir." Again, the expression of secret amusement crossed the Captain's face. It annoyed A-Riman slightly.

"What's so funny, Captain?"

"Nothing important, Sir. I'll send in the first one now."

"Bring him in personally," growled his superior. "Then we'll both be able to enjoy the joke." He switched off and waited.

There must be something very strange about this new draft of personnel to make Poltar laugh, he thought. He couldn't remember too many times when that officer had allowed his face to relax into a smile.

He pressed the admittance button at the signal and the Captain walked in.

"Here's the first one, Sir." He stepped aside.

A guardsman entered. He held his head directly to the front, pacing off the prescribed two paces with mathematical precision.

Still paying no attention to the furnishings of the office, he halted and came to a rigid salute.

A-Riman's practiced eyes took in the man's entire appearance at a glance. He was freshly uniformed. No spot of light reflected from the absolute, dead blackness of his clothing, excepting where the iridescent glow of the torches at his collar picked up the light and broke it into a blazing spectrum.

"Junior Search Technician Manir Kal reporting for duty, Sir," the man reported. He dropped his hand sharply.

"At ease, Guardsman," said A-Riman. "Haven't I seen you before?"

"Yes, Sir. I've been here."

"I seem to remember," commented the Group Commander dryly. He fixed Captain Poltar with a mildly scornful look.

"It's happened before," he remarked. "What's funny?"

"There's more to it, Sir," grinned Poltar. He moved to the door and beckoned. Another guardsman entered and stood at attention.

"Junior Psychologist Barc Kor Rhandi reporting for duty, Sir."

"Well, well," commented A-Riman. "Any more?"

"Three more, Sir," said Poltar. "A Physicist, a Trend Analyst, and a Pilot."

A-Riman's face broke into a grin, then he sat back and laughed.

"All right," he admitted. "You've scored. Bring 'em in and send for Sergeant Kembar."

Three more men filed in, reported, and stepped to the side. A-Riman looked at them severely.

"Now," he inquired, "just who dreamed up this idea?"

Manir Kal raised a hand. "I'm afraid I'm mainly responsible, Sir," he admitted. "Of course, Senior Rehabilitation Technician Kwybold had a little to do with it, too."

A-Riman nodded. "I thought I recognized his delicate touch," he said. "How was your training course?"

Manir Kal grimaced. "I spent a good share of it in the hospital, Sir." He rubbed his chest reflectively.

"There are probably a lot more, but I can name more than

twenty guardsmen who can beat me at swordplay. Every one of them got a piece of me." He paused.

"They taught me a lot, though," he added. "I've an idea I could give Sergeant Kembar a hard time now."

"Want the opportunity?" A-Riman smiled at him.

Manir Kal shook his head. "Thank you, Sir, but no," he said decidedly. "Next time I unsheath a weapon, it'll be in line of duty. It's part of my business and I don't give out free samples."

Sergeant Kembar came into the office. A-Riman caught him on the first pace.

"At ease, Sergeant." He waved a hand. "Here are five men for your new section."

"Thank you, Sir. I was wondering where I'd get some more people." Kembar looked toward the five guardsmen. "I'll get their . . ." He looked again, then stared directly at Manir Kal.

"I've met you before." He looked at the others.

"This one picks fights," stated Manir Kal expressionlessly.

"It runs after females," announced Rhandi.

"This is the talented one," boasted Malon.

Kembar placed his hands on his hips and shook his head.

"All right," he chuckled. "So I know about Rehabilitation, too. How do you think a lot of us got into this business in the first place?"

A-Riman nodded. "A lot of us know Mister Kwybold," he remarked dryly. "He's the person that got me started on Historical Synthesis and the study of Ethics." He coughed.

"Well, I'm going to have to go up to Main Base. Get your men integrated in your section, Sergeant." He turned.

"Captain Poltar."

"Sir?"

"I expect to be gone for several days. Take command in my absence."

As the viewscreen snapped off, Vandor ka Bensir looked searchingly at the man before him.

"You're positive these results of yours aren't coincidental?"

A-Riman shook his head positively. "We've ruled that out," he said firmly. "The trend computations were checked and double checked by more than a dozen experts after my people finished with them." He held out a hand.

"The truth is, Sir," he added, "we didn't take any new paths. The techniques we use are purely extensions of standard CAC cover-up process. Drone visits and necessary Guard activity in apprehension has often been erased from the history of some planet. All we've done is furnish our own drones, then use cover procedure. It works—almost inevitably."

"Hmm . . ." Ka Bensir pursed his lips, looking at the viewscreen. "How about those native operatives you trained?"

A-Riman closed his eyes for an instant. "That was a sort of innovation, Sir," he admitted, "though even that's been done by drones for their own peculiar purposes. In this situation, it seems to be helpful."

"Yes." Ka Bensir nodded slowly. "The way your people handled it, it seems to work." He fingered a desk ornament for a moment, then looked up.

"You know," he remarked, "this office has a lot of latitude sometimes. It takes a Council order to approve a new Corps in the Guard, of course. But Operations can pull quite a few people out of various arms and services to set up a special purpose command." He smiled thoughtfully.

"Of course, we have to justify the action later," he went on. But that's usually easy. The best justification there is consists of a list of results." He reached out and poked at the desk ornament again, then studied it closely.

"Did you ever hear of a criminal referred to as a 'degrader'?"

A-Riman frowned. "I've heard of them, of course, Sir. Never came into contact with any of them, though. No record of them ever operating in Sector Ten . . . or Seventeen, for that matter."

"No." Ka Bensir nodded. "There wouldn't be. These people act just like normal businessmen when they're in the main sectors.

Their real operations take place way out. They work on the isolated systems in the perimeter sectors, where the patrols are pretty thin." He looked around his office, then held up the ornament he had been toying with.

"Ever see anything like this?"

The object was heavy. A-Riman widened his eyes a little as his fingers came into contact with the metal.

"Unalloyed gold," he commented. "Seldom see that. It's too soft to be practical." He examined the intricate carving.

It was a distorted humanoid figure. The lines and folds of facial and body details were deeply cut, accentuating the caricature-like appearance of the figure. As he looked more closely, he could see no sign of tool marks. In fact, the figure looked more moulded than carved. Yet it couldn't have been moulded. Many of the lines were too painfully sharp. And he became conscious of an unfamiliar feel to the metal itself. Somehow, it was harder than it should have been. Yet, he was sure . . . He looked up questioningly.

"Something new," he admitted. "Can't think of any process that would get that effect. And I never felt gold that was just like that, either."

The Chief of Guard Operations nodded. "It's a primitive artifact," he said. "Probably was originally an idol of some kind. Not too important by itself, though the process of manufacture is interesting. Seems these natives had found a natural formation. You put a piece of gold in this grotto and it expands. Takes on the consistency of clay. It'll stay that way for several days, then it'll shrink to about ninety percent of its normal volume. There's an odd-ball molecular effect involved." Ka Bensir smiled.

"Got our physicists going nuts." He shrugged.

"But that's not the important thing about that little idol. It came here from a planet way out on the periphery." He frowned.

"That's one importer that went out of business in a hurry. But there are plenty more like him." He held out another of the figures.

"Here's another of the things," he said. "We've got a lot of

them. These little idols were brought into the Federation by a degrader. This individual and his crew had taken over this entire planet. They were bringing these things out by the ton. And they were bringing out a lot of other things, too." He put the idols back on his desk.

"Possibly a trader could pick up a few of these without seriously damaging the primitives who sold them to him. Illegal, sure, but it wouldn't have us biting ourselves. Trouble is, these people weren't just bringing in a few. They had a planetary factory going, using slave labor. Not only that, but they were exporting natives as slaves." He shrugged.

"Of course, there isn't much of a market for that sort of merchandise in the Federation, but they find their markets. They'll deal in anything, and with anyone.

"Let's take this degrader as a sample. He moved into this planet some time ago. Had all sorts of equipment. Mentacoms, body shields, blasters, converters—everything. He used the theological approach and moved into one of the nations on the planet. Within a year or so, he had complete control there. Then, he started his captive nation on a systematic course of conquest. It wasn't too long before he had the entire planet for a playground." He paused.

"So far, he sounds like some super drone with big ambitions. But this was all mere preparation. Once he had the planet under his thumb, this degrader systematically looted its resources—mineral, vegetable, ethnic—everything. A continuous flow of material and slaves came out and was scattered all over the galaxy. His prices were cheap and he'd sell anything to anyone who'd buy." Ka Bensir shrugged.

"He got careless after a while. Pulled an entry violation and tried to knock out a Sector Scout. So we got him." He wagged his head.

"He and his people talked, of course, and we traced down the planet he's been working over. That's when we found what a mess he'd left us." He looked at A-Riman.

"This one was really hopeless. Our people weren't even able to

discover the original cultural basics. Rehabilitation? How do you rebuild something when the blueprint's torn up and the material's cut to bits and scattered over a thousand solar systems? All we could find to work on was a completely perverted culture. The ethical structure was as fully inverted as you can imagine and they were going to have to work their way up to complete savagery. Maybe they'd have made it someday." He spread his hands.

"Only one thing for it," he added. "We cut them back to the caves and backed off. Someday, they'll get a fresh start—we hope." He looked up, then smiled.

"Of course, we could have called your people in and let you try out your new technique. But we didn't know too much about what you were doing, and you were a little tied up about that time, proving that you had something."

A-Riman tilted his head. "The way it sounds, Sir," he said, "we'd probably have wound up with nothing but a second-rate copy of something or other."

Ka Bensir waved a hand from side to side. "That's what we thought, too. I've got something in mind for you, though."

"Sir?"

"That's right. As of now, Commander, you are on detached service. You'll report directly to this office for operational control. You can choose the people you need for the missions we assign you. And you can form them into a special purpose command." The Chief of Operations held out a sheaf of paper.

"Your present mission is the detection and apprehension of degrader criminals, plus the rehabilitation—whenever possible—of those planets on which degraders have been found. Your sector is wherever such criminal activity exists." He chuckled.

"A little different from your original intent, I'll admit, but it'll give you a chance to perfect your techniques. We'll get into that other line of work later, when we can get you full justification."

A-Riman took the papers, looking at them thoughtfully. The Chief of Operations watched him for a moment.

"Oh, yes," he added. "Officially, you're the thirty-eighth Special Purpose Command. If you want to refer to yourselves as the 'Philosophical Command,' you're more than welcome to use the name."

7

NEITHER DISTORTION of image nor diffused vision were possible in the cool air of the Galankar nights. The few stars which shone from the moonless sky were hard, brilliant points, which gave barely enough light to allow an observer to dimly note his surroundings.

Here and there on the plain, scattered lights and fires flickered among vague shadows and faint high lights, to pick out camps of wandering herdsmen and occasional caravans.

To the north, against the black sky, even blacker masses and spires of high mountains thrust themselves abruptly out of the plain, bounding it and forming a wall to seal Atakar from any northern neighbors and make it truly the City of the Plain.

And to the west, torches carried by guards and citizens outlined the towers and walls of the barbaric city itself. From their hill, the searchers could look down through the clear, dry air, to see details of lighted streets and plazas.

Enveloped in brighter light than the rest of the city, stood a massive, alien building. Here, despite its strangeness, was the true center of the city—the focus of its traffic. Here was a huge, heavily braced pile of flat-roofed stone which squatted in its plaza, dominating the lesser structures about it as a giant among pygmies. And the great building called to itself all the commerce of the city and its surrounding plain.

Senior Search Supervisor Galen Kembar stood on a graveled slope of the eastern foothills, examining the Plain of Galankar and its city. He swung his viewer toward the city's major plaza, picking out its details. At last, he turned.

"Not much question left," he said. "That building just doesn't check out with any of the local architecture. Only one reason anyone would come up with anything as exotic as that. They've got to have the heavy pillars to hold plenty of mass. And that heavy-duty roof's got to have some other job besides weatherproofing. Any argument?"

Manir Kal looked away from the city. "I wouldn't make any bets against that, Sir," he said. "Only thing that roof's good for is a landing stage." He looked toward the dimly seen northern mountains.

"As far as that goes, the city itself shouldn't be here. It's got no northern or eastern access. Rule out air transport, which this planet hasn't heard about yet, and the only way out of this place is right back where the caravans all come from—unless you want to run the passes for fifty kilometers, to get to the sea. Doesn't leave this place much excuse for existence." He smiled.

"Konassa's the seaport and the plain swings right around to it. If anyone wants to trade to the north or west, he simply takes a flat road and bypasses Atakar." He turned again, to examine the huge building.

"Bet that roof's a problem in wet weather. It must rain here."

Kembar laughed shortly. "Doesn't it?" he asked. "Those tropical jungles they use for forests didn't grow in dry weather." He shrugged.

"Oh, of course, it isn't a true rain forest. Trees like those can store all kinds of water when there's a young cloudburst. Then they can live through a dry season and keep looking nice and green."

"True." Kal glanced at the cave mouth behind him. "Well, this makes it pretty definite for the first part of the job. We've spotted what looks like a degrader central on the first cast. Now, all we

need is a little proof and some method of cracking 'em." He turned back.

"What's next, Sir?"

"All I want to know right now," said Kembar, "is whether that big heap of rock is a temple. Then, I'll start working out tactics." He was still examining the city.

From the top of the massive building, a glowing orange ball floated toward the sky. Rising lazily, it arced northward, to finally disappear beyond the mountain wall. The two guardsmen watched its flight.

"That ties it down," remarked Kembar. "Any questions?"

"I don't care now whether they call that thing a temple or the National Bank of Commerce," said Kal. "I'm convinced."

Kembar chuckled. "Yeah. I've seen enough, too. My personal guess is a medium cargo carrier—loaded. Let's go in and see what Sergeant Rhandi's instruments picked up."

He pushed the blackout curtain aside, then stopped, blinking in the light. Finally, he walked over to the plotting board, looking down.

"Get the details on that ship?"

Barc Kor Rhandi glanced up, then grinned.

"Sure, I did, Sir. I love my comfort."

"Uh huh. So what about course and altitude?"

Rhandi looked down at the board. "I make it twelve point six at ten thousand, Sir."

"Good." Kembar examined his watch.

"Bintar, report a grav leaving the temple at eight point four two hours relative. It rose to altitude ten thousand meters, departing on course one two point four six, planetary true." He looked down at the plotting board.

"It had both ray and material shields energized. Velocity was approximately six hundred meters per second. Estimated mass twenty five thousand kilos. No city screen reaction." He paused.

"That should tie the situation down tight. Bintar, you and Malon will hold down base communication. Kem-dor and Millar

will act as base security. Kal and Rhandi will go with me. General scouting and recon patrol. We'll hold open sked with you per orders. Keep everything recorded and shoot it along to Group."

Bintar looked at his notes, then glanced up quizzically.

"That building's a temple, Sir?"

Kembar grinned. "Tentative identification. Want to bet?"

Bintar moved his head slowly from side to side. Kembar shrugged in mock disappointment and turned toward the equipment stack.

Manir Kal and Barc Kor Rhandi joined him, rapidly sorting out items relating to their specialties. A few minutes later, the three men were dressed as natives of the region. They walked out of the cave, closing their eyes for a few minutes before going through the screen, then putting on their night viewers. Kem-dor was already standing outside, on guard.

"Good luck," he said. "Procyon."

"Cerberus," responded Kembar.

Kal grinned. "Cerberus for a countersign? Any significance?"

"None intended," Kembar told him. "Just popped into my head." He turned to Rhandi.

"You reported bandit traces when you came in. Where were they?"

"South a few kilos. Spotted some bodies."

"Arrows?"

"Couple. Rest were hand-to-hand. The local boys play rough."

"I see." Kembar fingered his chin. "We'd better go down that way, then. I'd like to meet some of these rough boys Might learn something. We'll use levitators to save time. Lead off, Rhandi."

Rhandi nodded, touched his belt, then rose a few meters above the ground and sped southward, followed by the other two. He dipped to the plain, swung to follow a path, then eased to a stop and settled to the ground, followed by Kembar.

Kal snapped to a halt as though he had hit a wall, then in a flash, stood beside Kembar and Rhandi.

"What goes?" Kembar showed surprise. "Kal, you using a null?"

He looked at the big sergeant critically. Personal mass nullifiers were handy sometimes, of course. He knew that, but a man couldn't keep them turned on all the time. Their power drain was too great for continuous duty. And with their four kilos of intrinsic mass and their bulk, they were hard to carry and not easy to conceal. It was seldom that members of the Philosophical Command carried them when they were in native costume.

Kal nodded calmly.

"Yes, Sir," he said. "I'm big enough and skinny enough to hide it. I've got an idea it may come in handy."

"Well," decided Kembar, "it's a little unusual, but there's no rule against it and you're the man's got to fight it if we get into a jam. With your other equipment, you must feel like a freight carrier."

"Oh, well, if I get tired, I can always turn on the null once in a while for a short rest," grinned Kal. "I think the thing will pay its freight."

"Could be." Kembar dismissed the subject.

"Wonder where our boys would be."

Rhandi looked around. "If I wanted to spring an ambush about here, I'd hide out in that thicket," he mused. "Let's start here, though, and see what my sniffer says."

He walked toward the bodies in the trail, taking a small instrument from his garments as he approached them.

"Phoo," he muttered disgustedly. "Doesn't take a spectro-analyzer to tell these characters've been lying around for a while. Hope I can get a decent reading."

He focused the instrument on a broken arrowshaft, making several adjustments and noting the resultant readings. Finally, he straightened and returned to his companions.

"Okay now—I think," he commented "I should be able to trail the guy that turned that arrow loose."

He looked over at the thicket.

"Little checking around won't hurt anything, though," he added.

He walked into the clump of trees and vines.

Kembar and Kal watched him till he disappeared. They waited.

Finally, Rhandi came out into view again.

"Turned out to be a good guess," he announced. "Got a flock of readings, including a pretty complete spectro of the guy with the arrows. Looks as though about ten of these lads hung around that place for quite some time. Left plenty of traces." He grinned.

"They were dragging quite a bit of gear with them, too. Did a good job of clean-up, but the sniffer needle was bouncing all over the scale."

He clamped the analyzer to his levitator, making the necessary connections, then rose from the ground.

Kembar and Manir Kal followed him as he drifted around the clump of trees, circled, then set out on a straight course.

"According to all the rules, this is the right direction," he remarked. "There's another trail back there, but it hasn't got the bounce this one has."

He swept on silently, followed by the others.

Finally, he floated into a clump of trees, then circled.

Kembar looked over the ground. "Campsite?"

"Yes, Sir." Rhandi nodded. "Pretty fresh, too. We're on the trail all right."

"Good deal." Kembar looked around again. "Nice job of clean-up," he remarked. "Take a good tracker to get any ideas from this place." He shrugged.

"Well, let's get on with it. When you get this crowd into close range, hold up. I want to look these boys over before we meet them."

They continued, going further into the hills. After an hour or so of trailing, Rhandi halted.

"This is the hot one," he said. "We're just out of visual range." He grinned. "Of course, visibility's pretty poor right now, but let's say we'd be just out of sight if they had night viewers." He pointed.

"They're somewhere in that next thicket."

The three guardsmen touched their levitators, gaining altitude. At a hundred meters, Kembar stopped.

"That should be high enough," he said. "Now, we can look them over and get their layout. Better cut visibility, though. It's dark, but we just might show up against the sky." He grinned.

"Might shake 'em up a little if they spotted visitors floating in from overhead."

He fingered his belt control, making the necessary adjustments to his protector shield. Once set up, the modulation imposed would refract light around him, leaving him practically invisible. The two sergeants followed his example.

Below them, the bandit camp was plain to be seen in the three view screens. There was a clearing in the thicket. Riding and draft animals were picketed within easy distance of eight men who lay asleep, wrapped in their cloaks. Two more men walked guard, circling the small camp at irregular intervals.

Not far from the picketed animals was a neatly stacked pile of goods. Kembar examined the camp layout critically.

"Well set up," he commented approvingly. "These boys are careful and smart." He turned toward Manir Kal.

"We can go down close," he said. "Think you can nail both of those guards from about ten meters?"

"Pretty sure I can, Sir. You want to cut in when I've got them?"

"Yes. I think all three of us should be in on it."

"Roger." Kal dropped almost to the ground and circled to line the guards up in his beam.

Kembar and Rhandi followed, adjusting thin mentacom bands on their heads. A confused jumble of thoughts broke in on them. There was a camp scene. Across a fire, a woman was grinding grain. Running through this was a battle scene, which gave way to something involving a long line of chained men. Suddenly, there was nothing. Kal had triggered his projector.

Kembar looked at the two men below him. They were standing still.

"Hear me!" he thought forcefully. "What manner of men are you that you prey on your fellows?"

Shocked thoughts flooded toward him. Slowly, the recollections assumed a pattern familiar to the three guardsmen. The men were all escaped slaves. Four of them had managed to make their way out of the city and arm themselves. Then, by waylaying caravans, they had freed and recruited the rest.

They were a chance-gathered group, coming from various cities and hills of the Galenkar, and even beyond, from whence they had been taken by the slave raiding troops of Atakar. One day, they would make their way to their homes, but the trade of banditry, once forced upon them, had become both profitable and attractive. The two men were vague as to when they would actually start the journey back to their homes.

Kembar held up a hand, fingers curved in the ancient "on target" symbol.

Manir Kal nodded, his hypno still trained on the two sentries. Kembar went on with his mental conversation.

"You both know, of course, that the day of recapture will come?"

The men below readily agreed that it was inevitable. Intellectually, they recognized the obvious truth of the statement. There were, however, reservations. Deep in their minds, clung the age-old thought: "It can happen to others, of course. But I am immune."

Slowly, Kembar shook his head.

"No, it always happens—to every man who defies authority. In your case, however, I may be able to offer help. In the morning, three strangers will come to you. They will be friends. Listen to them."

He drew his fingers across his throat and Manir Kal promptly cut off his beam. The three guardsmen removed their mentacoms and watched the scene below.

The two sentries were gazing about anxiously, talking to each other.

After a few minutes of futile conjecture and equally futile

search, they awakened their comrades. An excited discussion followed, punctuated by many gestures.

Kembar signaled Kal and Rhandi close to him.

"It looks as though these ten will come in handy," he told them. "We'll make personal contact with them in the morning and see what develops. However it turns out, they can teach us plenty about the customs of this region. We'll get something from them whether they like it or not." He smiled.

"They might even have come into contact with some of the degraders. Give us an idea on their personnel layout, maybe."

Kal was looking down at the camp.

"Suppose there's any chance of this being a set-up?"

"There's always such a chance," Kembar told him. "I don't think we were detected when we came in, but . . . You didn't notice anything sour on the hypno, did you?"

"No, Sir. I just have a nasty habit of dreaming up all the dirty tricks I can think of, and then expecting the other guy to try them out on me."

"Best habit in the cosmos for a Search Tech." Kembar smiled. "Suppose you take another rough check on the whole lay-out, just in case." He hesitated.

"What do you think, Rhandi?"

Barc Kor Rhandi gazed thoughtfully down. "I'm not really sure about this, either," he muttered. "This whole thing looks almost too easy, and that's a pretty sharp camp for a bunch of amateur thugs. Helluva big pile of stuff down there, too. I'll say this, though. If this is an act, it's one of the best."

He took his spectro-analyzer from his garments, focusing it. Minutes passed. The analyzer was replaced by a radiation detector, then a hypnotizer beam was brought into brief play. Finally, he looked up, replacing his instruments.

"Plenty of precious metal and stones. A lot of odd organics, too, but I can't get a trace of modern type alloys," he reported. "Not a trace of unusual radiation, and if they've got screens up, they're the

first fully undetectable screens I've ever met. Far's I'm concerned, they're clean."

"Good enough." Kembar was satisfied. "Let's catch a quick nap till daybreak."

They settled to earth, seeking out a nearby clump of trees and vines to make temporary camp. As the other two settled for sleep, Kembar called Malon, giving him a report to relay to Group.

8

As Malon leaned back after sending out his report, Security Technician Dale Millar looked at him questioningly.

"Look, Sarge, it may sound like a fool question, but suppose these people weren't humanoid. How would we make contact with them?"

Malon turned. "Simple," he said. "We wouldn't. Just before you joined us, we were at point and had to call in team four to take over. You see, the teams are made up of all the known types of intelligent, oxygen breathing life." He grinned.

"The non-oxygen crowd have their own groups. They're nice guys, of course, but we don't mix with 'em. It ain't healthy." He coughed.

"Anyway, this one is a humanoid world, so it's our baby. We have to make contact and do all the open work, even if some other team spots degrader focus. If they did, they'd just call Group and we'd get pulled in."

Millar nodded. "I see, now. But how about the degraders? Will this gang be all humanoid, too?"

Malon shook his head emphatically.

"Not once in a million tries," he said. "Degraders couldn't care

less whether they mess up a native culture or not. We may find a mixup of anything in the galaxy. Last bunch we pulled in were of six different types. A cheroid from Arcturus Eighteen was running the gang He had some humanoids—terrans, no less—a few saurians from Aldebaran ten, an apian and a flock of centaurs. Just to top things off, it was a caprıform planet, so team four had to take it." He grinned.

"We may run into any form of life in the book over in that place, but the natives are humanoid, so the rest of Group won't show themselves. This one's all ours."

"Well." Millar sighed. "That's straight, at least. I'm having to learn this business by ear. It ain't easy."

"You'll get it," Malon assured him. "Most of us came in with no warning Fact is, none of us actually started with the Philo Command. The outfit's too new." He smiled.

"I originally came in as a search pilot in Criminal Apprehension. Mister Kembar started as a replacement security tech. Long time ago."

"Him?" Millar was startled. "I thought he was a degree man."

Bintar raised himself on one elbow.

"Hah," he snorted. "Warrant Search men with degrees just don't happen. Good grief, even in CAC, a degree man with Mr. Kembar's ability and service would be a Junior Commander, at least. Nope, the Chief was a recruit to start, just like the rest of us. Hit every grade in between, too."

"Most of 'em in CAC," said Malon. "Does a lot of brain scratching, though. We'll see him commanding a group before too long."

"Who takes over this team then?" Mintar looked thoughtful.

Malon shrugged "Probably Manir Kal. He and Rhandi are both up for warrant. Could be either of 'em, but you know who's got the whiskers."

"I don't know." Bintar shook his head slowly. "Bet Commander A-Riman switches the both of 'em and gives 'em teams somewhere else. Then we'll have a chief from some other group."

"How about you, Sarge?" queried Millar. "I don't mean to be

nosey, but I would sort of like to know how the chances are for promotion."

"Well, I'm up for Master," Malon told him. "And I'm the junior sergeant here. Passed the exams okay, I'm pretty sure. Chief saw to that." He put a hand to his head.

"Doubt if I'll sweat it out too long. Since the Command was formed, things have broken wide open. All a guy has to do is know his stuff and do things with it."

Kem-dor stuck his head into the cave entrance.

"Hey, that ship's coming back in."

Bintar jumped for the plotting board. "Knew it was a good idea to leave it on auto. Let's see what we've got."

"Get the Chief on the portable, Millar," ordered Malon. "I'll get in to Group." He grabbed at his microphone as he spun around.

"Brother," he chanted, "this has got to be their base. Come on, Bintar, let's have some data."

"What a break!" exulted Millar as he seized his mike. "Got their base on the first cast. Three calling chief. Three calling . . ."

Kembar snapped to sudden wakefulness. He answered Millar's call, then listened to the report.

"Good," he snapped out. "Heavy ship out, light ship in. Not much question about it now. We've got a main collection point at the very least. How about the screen and drive patterns?" He paused, listening.

"That does it," he said. "Same ship, both ways, and strictly a cargo job, at that." Next time that thing lifts, Group can take it out. Meanwhile, tell them we'll go in soon's possible and start cleaning up." He reached out and shook Manir Kal.

"Come on, Sarge. We've got work to do."

Kal was on his feet almost instantly.

"What's going on?"

"No more scouting for us," Kembar told him. "We start working on action plans for the rest of this job. That temple may not be main headquarters, but it's still a prime target."

Rhandi was suddenly awake.

"Are we going into the city?"

"Well, not the first thing this morning," Kembar told him. "We've got some unfinished business around here."

Kal nodded. "Yeah," he remarked. "They beat that into our heads back at Aldebaran Base. 'Never break a promise to a primitive.'" He laughed.

"You could term that one Regulation number triple A one."

"You could, at that," Kembar said. "Besides, those guys could still be mighty handy to have around." He frowned.

"Getting these yo-yo's out of Atakar is one thing," he added. "But remember, we'll have to hang around for a while. We've got to check and be sure none of their playmates are hiding in the bushes. We've got to wipe out that headquarters of theirs, but completely, and erase any traces of their stay here. And there'll be some pretty interesting little kinks in government to unsnarl, too."

Rhandi laughed ruefully. "Seem to remember something about that sort of thing. I had to help clean up after some guy once, you know. Sort of penance for my own sins."

"Yeah." Kembar nodded. "Good training." He looked toward the sky.

The sun was rising. Sweeping darkness before it, the star glared down—huge, brilliant, dominating. Abruptly, the vagueness of the night was replaced by harsh, sharp shadow and blinding highlights.

This, Kembar realized, was a young world—satellite to a young, active star. Quite conceivably, he thought, this was its first civilization. And this infant culture might survive, grow, and mature into a triumphantly successful civilization, rather than coming to a dead, sterile end, as many others, blighted by premature, unlawful contact with more advanced peoples, had done.

"That is," he told himself, "if we can keep these idiots from lousing things up."

He turned, to walk out of the concealing thicket.

"Well," he called over his shoulder, "let's get together with these bandits of ours."

He pulled off his hat to put the mentacom circlet on his head. Then, he cocked it to an angle, pulled the hat back on, and strode forward.

As the three crossed the clearing, a voice from the woods cried out a challenge. Kembar stopped, raising his hands, palms outward. The voice said more, ending on a questioning note. Kembar half turned.

"Language sound familiar? He wants to know who we are and where we came from."

Barc Kor Rhandi hadn't put his mentacom on. He tilted his head.

"Sounds a little like primitive Osirian, Sir," he said. "So, it should be easy—if we want to vocalize."

"Yeah," Kal told him. "As long as they don't have a few thousand odd dialects."

A man stepped from the trees ahead, bow ready for action.

"Who are you and where do you come from?" he repeated.

Kembar looked closely at him. "We are three strangers from a far land," he thought soothingly. "Last night, two of your number had word concerning us."

"You are unarmed." It was a statement, not a question.

Kembar smiled. "We have neither bows nor swords," he evaded.

The man looked at them critically, then appeared satisfied. He gestured toward a path between the trees.

"Come," he ordered. "Our leader, Lanko, wants to speak with you."

The three walked into the forest ahead of the sentry, coming to the bandit campsite. The nine escaped slaves, seated about on the ground, eyed them as they approached. One got to his feet.

"I am Lanko," he announced. "Are you the three strangers Musa and Dano told us of?"

"We are." Kembar stepped forward. "Musa and Dano were spoken to by us, last night."

"How? They saw nothing of you, yet they heard you clearly."

"We have instruments which are strange to you. One of these tools allows us to talk to men from a distance."

One man in the group seized his bow.

"I don't think we should trust these three, Lanko," he growled. "How can we be sure they aren't spies from the priests of Atakar?" He examined the guardsmen scowlingly.

"To be sure, these are men, and not strange monsters. Yet they are no such men as I have ever seen. And they speak of things such as only the priests have knowledge of."

Kembar laughed easily. "Do you think the priests of Atakar would trouble to send spies to you?" He shook his head.

"No. All they would need know would be the place where you camp Then they would simply send soldiers to take you back to captivity."

The man was unconvinced. "I still say shoot first and ask questions later," he told the leader.

Kembar spread his hands wide. "To pull a bowstring, to release the arrow," he said, "this is easy. But to get answers once this has been done? This is not quite so simple. And this would help you none at all. If the ones in Atakar know your whereabouts, shooting us is a useless gesture. If they don't have this knowledge—and I'm quite sure they don't—it should be obvious that we have told them nothing of your presence here, and so are unlikely to be spies of theirs." He smiled.

"After all," he reminded them, "we have known your location since last night, when we talked to Musa and Dano."

The leader nodded. "Enough, Dasnor. This man's words have the true tone. And it is fact that we can use any extra help we may get. This is our main reason for freeing caravan slaves." He waved a hand.

"Be seated, strangers, and tell us why you come here."

Another man in the group had been listening, puzzlement growing in his expression.

"How is this?" he inquired, "that you speak my native language

well, yet my companions from the Galenkar, who speak no Jogurthian, appear to understand you perfectly?"

Lanko turned to him. "But he was speaking plainly in Karthanese."

"No," persisted the other. "There was no word in the tongue of Karth. I heard him as plainly as you. The language he was using was the purest of Jogurthian."

Kembar held up his hands.

"Please! You are both right, in a way," he said. "And yet, you are also both quite wrong. We speak no language either of you has ever heard, but one of our tools allows us to speak to all men in their own native tongues." He looked around the group of men.

"We three have come to you, both to give and to ask for aid. From our own lands have come thieves. These are most dangerous beings, who have gone among the priests and into the temple of Atakar. They have rebuilt the temple and the city, and they have corrupted the people and the beliefs of the city. It is our duty to take these thieves and to undo the damage they have caused. In this, you can help us." He paused.

"And, since this duty of ours also demands that we give you once more a free land in which to live, we can and must help you."

The men sat up, looking suddenly hopeful. But Lanko's face clouded.

"Tell me this," he demanded. "How can a handful of fugitive slaves and three unarmed strangers overcome the might of Atakar?" He shook his head.

"This is a great undertaking, for Atakar has so grown as to have all the Galankar, even to great Konassa, at her feet."

"We have companions who can deal with the might of Atakar," Kembar told him. "It is our duty to work from within the city, however. And you know the customs of this world of yours, so you can help us in this."

Lanko stroked his short beard.

"It is possible that we could enter the city as traders," he mused.

"Never before have we dared enter Atakar itself, but always we have gone to another city." He looked toward the pile of goods.

"It is almost time to trade somewhere, though, for we are more in need of certain foodstuffs than of goods. And . . . maybe this is a way to end this thieves' existence of ours. Maybe we can truly become free men once more." He held out his hands.

"Stranger, if you can prove your words, we will work with you."

"Very well." Kembar got to his feet. "We have many things to show—many things to explain." He turned.

"Get out your instruction kit, Rhandi," he ordered. "This is where you take over." He glanced toward Manir Kal.

"Get on the communicator. Give Malon a run-down, and have him relay it. This may take a few days." He turned again, to watch as Rhandi set up his equipment.

The prospective recruits watched, listened, and absorbed. At first, they found it hard to believe that the tiny points of light in the sky might be surrounded by invisible worlds as great as—even greater than—their own. But the equipment used by Rhandi had its own persuasive powers. Too, the very presence of the devices before them had weight in convincing the ten of the existence of advanced cultures.

Gradually, they came to realize the scope of the galaxy. Slowly, their crude and degrader-distorted philosophy was replaced by positive knowledge of the many civilized worlds in space. Memory pictures projected by the three guardsmen gave them personal glimpses of Federation life and of degrader damage done on other worlds than their own.

Carefully, Rhandi nursed his equipment, being sure that no mental damage was done to the minds which were swiftly absorbing knowledge which normally could come only to their most remote descendants.

The sun crawled across the sky, approached the distant horizon, and dipped beneath the plain. Shadows became long, then faded into all pervading darkness. Another day dawned and wore

on. At last, Kembar stretched and got to his feet, facing the seated men.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it's been a long session. But now, you are aware of who we actually are. You know exactly why we are here, and what we plan to do. You also know things that very few, and possibly no others of the people of your planet will know for thousands of years." He smiled.

"You also know—those of you who are still listening—that many of your people are incapable of receiving this knowledge without suffering mental damage." He nodded toward a few of the group, who lay, sleeping peacefully.

"And further, you know the peculiar terms of service in the Stellar Guard. For example, you know that no guardsman can closely associate with any but other guardsmen so long as he is on a primitive or undeveloped planet. Should you select service with us, you will have a long period of service. And while you are on this planet, you may have no close friends—no wife—no children. You will have to observe a good many other stringent regulations." He sighed.

"It's a hard life. For some, it's an impossible life. But it can be a satisfying one. After retirement, too, there are rewards. One knows real freedom." He paused, looking at the five men who still looked alertly back at him.

"So," he continued, "we come to the parting of the ways. Those of you who wish to take service as Stellar Guard recruits are more than welcome. Those of you who do not so wish have that choice. There is no penalty—no threat. If you do not wish to take service, all memory of these past hours and of those of your comrades who remain here will be taken from you by the same instruments that gave you this new knowledge. For these memories will be substituted memories of escape from Atakar and her control by your own efforts." He smiled.

"You will then be returned to your former homes together with those five who were not strong enough to accept the information

we had to give. From that day, you and they will be free to live as you choose. It's your choice."

Lanko sat, thinking. Finally, he lifted his head.

"A few years ago," he said, "I was counted a rich man. I had flocks and herds, and many men to watch over them. I was happy with that life, but all in one day, it was taken from me. The slave raiders came." He shook his head.

"This is something that should never happen again—anywhere." He looked around him, at the woods and the sky, then faced Kembar again.

"By this time, my flocks are scattered. If I were to return to Karth, I would be forced to start again, rebuilding from nothing. I can't speak for others in this, but I will gladly take the oath."

Another man shook his head. "I'm not so sure," he said. "I was never rightly called rich, but I had a good life. I have my trade, and I am skilled in it." He looked thoughtful.

"Then, too, there was a woman. She may be gone by now, but there are others. I'm not so sure I could serve out the years in loneliness. Perhaps I had best return with these five." He pointed to the men who slept peacefully, their minds innocent of knowledge of those thing which lay beyond the Galankar.

Kembar nodded. "We will return you to your home," he promised.

At last, the decisions were made. Lanko and Banasel, the Jogurthian, decided to take the oath and enter Guard service. The other three declined for their own reasons. Kembar swung around to face Rhandi.

"Take over with these three," he ordered. He punched his control belt.

"Three, this is Chief. Home in on my signal. We've got a job."

While they waited for the ship, Rhandi worked on the three men entrusted to him, as well as on the five sleepers. He was still at work when Malon brought the scout cruiser into the clearing.

At last, he straightened.

"You know, I just discovered something. I'm a creative artist,"

he said. "Those guys have enough tales to keep their grandchildren happy for their entire childhood." He tilted his head toward the eight unconscious forms.

"Bunch of individual heroes, those," he added. "And they know they lived it, too." He sobered.

"Going to be a little rough on anyone who mixes with some of them, though. I gave them a little insight into combat technique in the process."

"Not going to have a bunch of criminals here, are we?"

"Never happen, Sir." Rhandi shook his head decidedly. "They can take care of anyone they have to, but they'll never particularly care for sword swinging. Easier to make an honest living."

"Fair enough." Kembar was satisfied. "Let's get 'em aboard. Malon, you and Millar can drop 'em off here and there. Give 'em the guide tapes, Rhandi. They can pick up their data on the way."

He watched as the men were carried aboard the cruiser and the port was closed.

Lanko's gaze followed the cruiser as it lifted to the tree tops, then abruptly blinked out of sight. He strained his eyes, trying to catch some further glimpse of its outlines, then turned to Kembar.

"I hate to see them go," he said quietly. "They were good comrades."

Kembar placed his hand on the man's shoulder.

"You will find other friends and comrades," he said. "These? You can never again share in their lives, but there's nothing to prevent you from guarding them from harm. No rule says you can't help them prosper, so long as you do harm to no innocent person." He turned away.

"Well, we've got a lot of training to do."

9

Barc Kar Rhandi was awake when Lanko opened his eyes. He looked over at the Karthian's pallet.

"Ready to go to work?"

Lanko shook his head, then rubbed the corner of one eye.

"This is the day, isn't it?"

He got to his feet and walked over to the window which was cut into the sun-baked brick. For a few minutes, he stood, looking out at the courtyard.

It had been a strenuous period of training, he thought. He looked enviously back at Rhandi. The guardsman had gone through all this long ago. He didn't have to worry about his actions. He didn't have to wonder whether he was remembering correctly. For him, everything came automatically, with the ease of long practice. But he, Lanko? His memory scanned back to the first days of his service.

He had stood, watching, as the team of strangers rigged strange, many lensed boxes. He had seen a hole suddenly appear under the roots of a great tree and a little later, he had been led into that hole, where he had found living quarters moulded out of the ground.

They had been comfortable quarters, too, and there he and Banasel had made their home while advanced science and techniques of operation were welded into their consciousnesses. They had learned the purpose and operation of those mysterious tools of the strangers. And they had learned to know their new comrades and their sometimes strange philosophy.

When night had come, they had gone to sleep, their heads humming with the nearly ultimate strain of the day's effort.

He could remember the patrol of Atakaran soldiery that had intruded one day into the empty clearing. There had been no spectacular action. One moment, the patrol had been advancing toward the mouth of the cave, their leader examining the roots of the great tree with suspicion. Then all of them had slipped limply to the ground.

Casually, the team of guardsmen had gathered them up and taken them into the cave, where Rhandi had set up his hypno projector, painstakingly explaining to the recruits what steps he was taking and why.

The treatment had lasted only an hour or so, then the Atakarans had been returned to the other side of the forest.

Lanko smiled as he thought of the probable results of that encounter. Memories of a fierce engagement had been placed in the minds of those soldiers. They had found the marauding band which had waylaid so many caravans. And for hours they had battled with this almost superhumanly ferocious band of outlaws. Finally, after great effort, they had cut down the last man and staggered out of the forest, exhausted almost beyond endurance, but borne up by the sense of victory and still able to carry their loot from the bodies of the vanquished.

The Karthian could visualize the telling and retelling of this saga in barrack and wineshop. He could almost see the interest, followed by bored tolerance, and at last, by annoyed dismissal. He could see members of the patrol gradually dropping the matter as they found none but their own companions to relate it to. By now, he knew, the incident would have been forgotten—worn out by too constant repetition.

He looked down again, into the courtyard. The caravan was stabled out there. He knew he should regret the abandonment of those bales of goods, but their value seemed somehow unreal. He had never been a trader, nor would he ever be a trader. This had been a mere pose, adopted for a time, but now to be dropped like an outworn cloak. He had a real assignment.

He turned away from the window.

"Better get some of the sleep off me," he said.

He walked over to the bowl of water and bent over, dashing some of it into his face. Blinking, he reached for a cloth and, after a few moments of vigorous rubbing, he strode toward the curtained door, to follow Rhandi to the street.

Outside, the life of Atakar was in full swing. The narrow street was full of men and women, who hurried to complete their affairs. At a cross street, a crowd gathered, waiting as a drover herded his charges to market.

Behind, the soft, sucking pad of large, flat feet heralded the approach of a denkem, the draft beast of the plains. Under the urging of its driver, the animal forced its way through the crowd, shouldering people aside as it progressed.

Lanko glanced back to see the beast looming over him. Hurriedly, he leaped aside, crashing into a wall.

"Stinking denkem!" He staggered from the wall, glaring at the huge beast. The driver looked aside.

"Careful of your clothing, pretty one," he sneered. "You should know better than to mix with those who make and deliver the goods you profit by."

The denkem swaggered on its way, swinging its head aside to take a nip at Rhandi's shoulder The guardsman glanced aside carelessly.

"Better protect that brute of yours, driver," he said. "He could starve to death with a mouthful of broken teeth."

The man looked at him doubtfully, then turned away, forcing his beast into a new path.

"Hah!" he growled. "Idlers!"

Rhandi turned, grinning.

"You forgot one of the minor advantages we have, Lanko," he said softly. "Our body shields, remember?"

"I'm sorry, Sergeant. I'll try not to forget again."

"Make it a good try," cautioned Rhandi. "The best weapon you can have is a reputation for complete fearlessness. People will fol-

low a fearless man, even though they may have doubts as to his philosophy."

As they approached the temple, the streets became wider. Crowds idled before the shops. Traders from the far places of the planet rubbed shoulders with officers and soldiers of the Imperial regiments. Cries of vendors mingled with the sound of bargaining, and artisans slipped through the streets, bound on their own missions. An occasional cry of "Make way!" warned of the approach of a gaily decorated noble's chariot.

Ignoring all the colorful clamor, the two men slipped through the crowd, crossed the wide plaza, and mounted the steps of the temple of Senemanos, the degrader.

Both of them knew that somewhere in the huge building, a band of criminals had their headquarters. Desperate beings of many differing races, these degraders had one thing in common. Their basic plan for living put them in unalterable opposition to orderly civilization. Their ethical code was simple and elementary: "My desires are paramount. What I like, I do. What I want, I take."

To their single dimensioned minds, the psychiatric treatment awaiting them at Aldebaran Base was equivalent to horrifying death—complete extinction of their personalities. The idea of becoming normal citizens of their various worlds was so utterly repugnant as to be a concept they would fight against to the last milligram of their vital force.

Both of the guardsmen knew that the capture or elimination of these beings was essential to the health of this planet. Their aim, then, was to draw their quarry from concealment as quickly as could be.

As the two men reached the top step of the temple, Rhandi stepped aside.

"This is Rhandi," he announced softly. "At station."

Quickly, Lanko swept his hand to his control belt, bringing an audio amplifier to full volume.

"Oh, sinful men of Atakar, hear me!" he cried, stretching his

arms wide. "I come among you to call you back to the paths of right . . ."

As the exhortation went on, Rhandi slid back into the shadowed columns of the temple, watching for whoever might come from the interior. Once, to his left, he saw Manir Kal sliding from column to column. Lanko's voice continued to rise and fall, emotional tension building as the moments passed. Rhandi shook his head admiringly. The Karthian had absorbed psychological principles like a sponge.

Suddenly, a rain of stones struck the temple steps. Rhandi looked back. Lanko was standing in the open, arms folded, head up. Stones were bounding from his body shield. A slight smile played about his lips. Kembar's voice came over the communicator.

"How're you doing, Lanko?"

"More fun than a jewel caravan." The answer was silent, with overtones of real amusement.

"Good man," applauded Manir Kal.

Lanko shook his head and stretched out his arms again.

"Cease your play, Oh foolish ones," he roared. "Do you imagine your futile pebbles can harm the messenger of the Great One, when your false gods cower in fright behind me?"

"Oh, Brother." It was Millar's voice. "That'll draw fire if anything will."

From the temple entrance, a huge figure appeared Before him, the caprıform, Senemanos pushed a mobile blaster. As he started to focus the projector, he was caught in the beams of eight paralyzer rays. His shield glowed redly, then rapidly ran up the spectrum.

Abruptly, it overloaded, sparkling in vivid glory for an instant, before it glowed violet, then blacked out. The giant figure slumped to the stones.

"One," said Bintar.

"Into the temple," ordered Kembar. "We've got to pick up the rest of this gang."

Inside, a group of priests came rushing at the invaders. Kal swept his paralyzer across them. Silently, the entire group slid to the paving. Echoes rang about the huge room as their weapons clattered to the stones.

"No real score there," growled Kal. "They must be holed up."

As he started forward once more, his shield glowed fiercely. Almost instantly, he flashed into motion, sweeping up and to the right The glow died as suddenly as it had come.

"Knew that null would pay off," he exulted.

Beams from the rest of the team quickly snapped about the temple, picking out a number of shield-flares at the back of the altar. There was a dark mass of equipment, lighted only by the flares of the shields of the varied beings grouped about it. A many-armed creature was training the projector nozzle.

"Keep moving," ordered Kembar. "That thing's too hot for our shields. Switch to full disruption and concentrate your fire to blind that gunpointer."

A rumble of falling masonry followed Manir Kal's progress through the temple. His blaster at full disintegration power, he was searching for the installation's power unit. Disdaining the use of hallways, he quartered the building in straight lines, scattering debris as he went.

The other team members dispersed, dashing from side to side in the great temple, their fire concentrated on the degrader shield. Falling columns and chunks of decorative plaster told of the blinded pointer's efforts to locate them with his beam.

The rumble in the main building died. Suddenly, the shield flare about the heavy blaster died, to be replaced by a blinding flare of released energy. The degrader group scattered, blown about like thistledown. As the concussion expanded in an almost solid wave, the walls of the temple visibly bowed, then the structure started to fold in on itself.

Manir Kal's voice sounded over the communicator.

"Out!" he shouted. "She's about to blow."

The team was already on its way. At the shout, the members

speeded their drives, scooping up the paralyzed form of Senemanos as they went.

At a command from Kembar, Lanko broke off his harangue and joined the group in its flight to high altitude.

A concussion wave bounced them about as an immense column of fire shot up toward the heavens. It rose far into the sky, then mushroomed into a great cloud.

Below, in the city, bits of buildings flew about, battering still other bits from other buildings. Flaming debris fell from the cloud to shower the stricken city.

Beneath the holocaust, terrified crowds struggled to flee. Fires blossomed out on all sides, blocking avenues of escape—threatening the panic-stricken mobs with total destruction. Even at the altitude the guardsmen had sought, shouts and screams were plain to be heard.

"Three to Group," Kembar called. "Can you give us condensation?"

"This is Group," came a quick answer. "Return to ship. We are condensing moisture to atmospheric limit. What happened?"

"Old-fashioned power pile," Manir Kal broke in. "When I tampered with its shield, it started running wild. The backlash when the projector blew set it off, but good. No time to quench or readjust, so I got out of there."

"Roger," responded Group. "Here's your storm."

The rain started with a furious rush. Driven by a cold wind, it came in sheets, driving at the flames in the city—smothering them with solid masses of water. One by one, the walls of flame blacked out, leaving smoking ruins to bow to the fury of the flash storm.

At last, the rain faltered, then stopped. The wind became dry, snatching at the moisture thirstily and blowing the smoke of the ruins aside.

Gradually, the panic of the mobs subsided. The mass flight slowed and a few bolder spirits stopped, looked back, then turned, to start a cautious return through shattered gates.

Little by little, order replaced wild panic as those of the populace

who were able waded through the flooded streets, each seeking his own.

Team three, still towing the unconscious form of the degrader chief, Senemanos, swept into the entry lock of the Group's cruiser.

As he came aboard, Kembar stopped, snapped a salute aft in the traditional gesture, then saluted the Duty Officer.

"Request permission to come aboard, Sir."

"Permission granted, Mr. Kembar." The D.O. returned the salute. "Report to Commander A-Riman in Control."

Kembar walked slowly toward the control blister.

"Oh, no," he groaned to himself. "The Old Man himself comes out to see how things are going. And that's just the time Kembar picks to pull a classic." He punched a fist into his other hand.

"Sure," he told himself. "We wound up the mission. We eliminated the degraders. We tore their temple down. Sure, we did—the hard way. And with all the finesse of a cub bear in the refrigerator." Again, he pounded his fist into his hand.

"Scratch one city. Kill off half the populace of same, plus a flock of visitors. Mangle everyone else in the area. And all of this to get one suspect. Oh great! This one'll stay in planetary history as long as there is a history." He grinned wryly.

"Like to see the guy that's smart enough to clean this mess up."

He paused at the control room door, then shrugged resignedly and tapped on the panel.

"Well," he told himself, "waiting makes it worse."

Commander A-Riman looked up from a few documents he had been fingering.

"Thought we'd lost you that time, Kembar."

"No, Sir." Kembar shook his head. "It was pretty crude, but we didn't lose any team members, at least."

"That's not exactly what I meant," A Riman told him. "Know what you ran into down there?"

"I think I do, Sir—now," said Kembar. "That was a well-protected set-up. I was sure we'd scouted adequately, but . . ."

"It wasn't your scouting." A-Riman shook his head. "It was

Senemanos' planning. Even at that, you had his central disposition down cold. And your line of attack was adequate. There was just one trouble." He smiled.

"No one realized the scope of this Senemanos' influence. You were committed before we discovered that he was running gangs all over the periphery. And by that time, it was a little late to do anything but hope." A-Riman waved a hand.

"Oh, Group called in for reinforcements, and I brought a fleet out with me. But we couldn't do a thing as long as you were in there, and there wasn't a chance of pulling you out. We had to haul off and wait." He smiled faintly.

"And hope."

Kembar frowned. "I don't see . . ."

"Senemanos' operations on this planet were simply incidental," A-Riman told him. "These minor gangs we've been picking up weren't independent. They were instructed and controlled by this same Senemanos. And he had to have a headquarters. This was it and he had that temple and the city itself so well fortified he could have stood off a squadron or two—if his detectors had given him any warning." He smiled again.

"But you came sneaking in with a few men and a light, deception screened ship. Then, before he had any warning of your presence, you had sneaked inside his main screen It caught him off balance and that native recruit of yours got him excited, which was the really big break. He lost his head.

"Now, we can clean up these small gangs. They've got no leadership—no one to report to—no one to work out marketing contracts for them." The smile widened to a grin.

"That ship you spotted turned out to be a courier, not a freighter. Had several of the gang leaders aboard, too."

"But wrecking that temple and the city was an error, Sir. If I'd taken my time and done more scouting . . ."

"He'd have had you on his detectors." A-Riman shook his head. "And then, he'd have chewed you up and spit you out and come looking for the Group Cruiser. And we'd have had a real box of

trouble. If that was a mistake, it was an inspired one." He picked up the documents from the desk before him.

"Of course, Captain, you've got yourself a really tough job now. There's a real mess down there that's got to be cleaned up. We'll train these two recruits of yours and send 'em back to you as soon's possible, of course. You might have a look at the other main continent, too. It doesn't look as though they knocked it around, but you can never tell."

"Yes, Sir. We'll probably need to . . . CAPTAIN?"

"You'll need the rank," A-Riman assured him. "It's going to take a group-sized team to clean this one up. I'd say five or six cycles, at least. Then, you'll have to leave your two recruits here as resident guardsmen. They'll take a little supervision—at least for a while." He held out the documents.

"Here are your orders. Dismissed."

• 10

"WELL, we can't get at it any sooner."

Lanko picked up his bow and walked to the door, then down the steps of the inn. He paused in the courtyard, looking about him.

Below, the village plaza was deserted. A few children played in the narrow, winding lane that led up the mountainside, between the houses of the village.

In the valley below the village, he could see herds scattered about the meadow. And beyond them, on the far slope, plumes of smoke rose from smelting pits and charcoal stacks. Further along the mountain shoulder, he could see the tiny figures of pack animals which threaded their way over narrow trails, to bring ore from the mine tunnels and wood from the forests. He shook his

head and turned again, to look up toward the high peaks to the north.

High above the scene, streamers of wind-blown snow trailed out, to rise far into the sky and fade at last in the clear upper air, having climbed above the never climbed—the peaks of Zalu-si, highest mountain of the Torei Kran. Lanko smiled wryly.

"The King of Mountains," he said musingly. "The one nobody ever so much as thinks about going up. And that's where they're set up, so that's where we've got to go."

"Yeah." Banasel had come beside him. "But just where are they, once we get up there? That thing's got three spires, or have you noticed?"

"You tell me!" Lanko laughed shortly. "Graveto's only good for rough readings, and we can't flip on anything that'd radiate." He looked at the wide mass of rock thoughtfully.

"It's about forty kilometers to those peaks," he said. "Considering our range of error, that lets us be sure they're somewhere on top of that thing—we think." He shrugged.

"Personally, I'd bet on the left-hand spire. It's got a better outlook over the Galenkar. But I could be way off."

"Makes sense, though." Banasel nodded. "Probably on the south rim, too. They'd want a clear shot over the valley, I suppose."

"Yeah. So we have to circle and come in from the back. Well, it'll take us a few days, but we'll get close enough to make sure. Then, somehow, we'll get to 'em." Lanko glanced at his companion. "Got everything?"

"Everything I'm going to carry." Banasel grinned. "Pack animals are loaded with most of our junk." He frowned.

"What do we do with those beasts? This is supposed to be the last go-around."

"Oh, I don't know." Lanko glanced back toward the stables. "They'll get us pretty close to the top before they have to quit. Then, I guess we'll hide our stuff out and turn the brutes loose. They're half wild, anyway, so they'll get along. Maybe we can pick up our gear later." He smiled.

"I'll leave that up to Manir Kal to decide. Right now, I'm still just another terzal hunter—just like all season."

"Yeah, that's right, too." Banasel walked across the courtyard and started adjusting the hitches on his animal's pack. Lanko followed him.

As they worked, the hostler came toward them.

"Figure on being gone long this time?"

Banasel looked around.

"That depends on the terzal. If we find a few right away, we'll come on in and sell the pelts. Otherwise? Well, we've been here quite a while. We might just move on."

The man wagged his head. "You've been on Zalu-si before, I know," he said. "But I tell you again, it can be dangerous. And there is always the great white killer."

Lanko glanced around. "I'm not so sure about him. He should have a valuable pelt."

"That may be, friend." The man waved a hand northward. "But I think no man will ever have that pelt. There are strange things up there on the King of Mountains and the white one is not the least of these. This is no ordinary terzal. He lives somewhere up there, but each spring, he comes down. And each spring he takes his toll from the village. Last year, it was five. This year? Who knows?"

"I should think the village hunters would have a serious try at getting him."

The hostler shrugged. "This has been tried. He's been seen by the parties, but no man has wounded him. When there are large bands out, he goes up the mountain, where no man can climb. I think this is more than an ordinary terzal." He spread his hands.

"And our hunters think so, too. They search the slopes of the south mountain, where there are pelts to be had and where the white one never comes."

Lanko smiled. "I know," he said. "We were told we would be welcome to hunt all we wished on the Zalu-si." He shrugged and looked back at his loaded animal.

"Well, I suppose we might as well go ahead. Maybe we'll be back in a few days, but then again, maybe we'll just go on." He smiled.

"We have never stayed in one place for too long, you see. We prefer to wander—to go where the terzal are."

He nodded at Banasel, then urged his animal forward and out of the courtyard.

Beyond the inn, the lane became a vague path which disappeared completely high above the village. They continued their way to the upper slopes of the mountain, their sure-footed pack beasts picking their way over the rocky ground and choosing their footing with care as they went higher and higher.

The day wore on and they made camp for the night in a rocky ravine. Another day came and they continued on their way.

At last, Lanko stopped, looking up toward the rock faces above them. Banasel came up beside him.

"Well, this is where we go straight up."

"Yeah." Lanko frowned. "Getting a little late now, though." He pointed.

"See that scrub growth over across the snow field? It's not more than three or four kilos. Make a good campsite and we can go on from there in the morning."

Banasel nodded. "Yeah. We can take it easy, then start fresh. Might be a good idea."

It took over an hour to reach the small forest. At last, they paused by a small pool under a waterfall. Banasel looked around, at the cliffs.

"Might be really good terzal country."

"Might be, at that." Lanko nodded. "If we were really professional hunters, we'd have it made. Couple of good men just might make a fortune up here." He walked over to a tree.

"Look how one of 'em's stripped this bark, will you? Pretty big fellow, too."

Banasel came over to join him.

"Big, all right. Real grandpappy, with a reach like that." He bent over, examining the ground.

"Man, look at the size of that pad! They grow 'em big up here." He stepped away, following the faint trail.

Lanko examined the nearby tracks thoughtfully.

"You know, it seems to me these are pretty fresh. Look by the stream. Water's still seeping in that one. And that bark . . ." He straightened, looking around.

"I'm not sure, but we may have run across that big fellow they've been having a hard time with back at the village."

"Could be." Banasel had approached the cliff. He picked some hair from a bush and looked closely at it. "Of course, this could be from some ordinary terzal's stripes, but it's all white—and pretty coarse, too. Looks more like heavy, side hair. Should be red." He came back, toward Lanko.

"What do you think? Maybe we'd better find some other place to have chow." He pointed with tilted head.

"Could be holed up in that cave over there, you know. And we're not hunting any more."

"Just could be up there." Lanko examined the cave mouth. "Of course, we could go away, but with that guy's reputation, I wouldn't like to have him tag along and jump us sometime when we didn't want to be bothered. And, if we could nail him, we'd be doing those villagers back there a real favor." He smiled.

"Besides, I've heard of albino terzal, but I never saw one. I'd like to get that big pelt just for us and company." He paused.

"Look, suppose we stake out the denpel and make noises like a couple of guys with nothing on their minds but chow. Just keep your bow handy. If this terzal's the one they've been telling us about, we won't have to go hunting him."

Banasel nodded. "No, I guess not—especially with a pair of nice, juicy denpel right under his nose." He shrugged.

"Come to think of it, maybe a terzal rug would be nice on cold nights."

They unpacked their cooking gear, then tethered the two ani-

mals to a tree by the pool. With apparent casualness, they went back to a shady spot by the stream and started to make their fire and cook their meal.

The denpel stood quietly for a few minutes, then started moving about uneasily. Suddenly, one of them gave a sharp whistle, then both of the animals started jerking at their tethers, frantically trying to break free.

A long, white shape was coming out of the cave.

Slowly, Lanko let his hand drop to pick up his bow. He kept his eyes on the terzal as the beast eased its bulk down the side of the cliff.

The terzal seemed to flow across the rocks till it reached the side of the pool. Then it bunched its body in preparation for a spring toward the two terrified denpel.

Lanko glanced over at his companion as he slowly eased his bow into position.

Banasel had notched an arrow and sat tensely. Suddenly, he came out of his crouch. The arrow came back to his ear, then sped forward with a sharp, twanging snap. Instantly, Lanko was on his feet, his own bowstring singing.

The terzal had risen to its hind legs. For an instant, it pawed at the arrow which stuck from its neck, then, as Lanko's arrow bit into its side, it screamed with pain and rage and wheeled to charge toward the two men. Blood welled out, staining its creamy white fur.

"Take the left eye, Ban," called Lanko. He drew another arrow back and waited.

Moving with deceptive speed, the terzal came closer. Lanko stood, estimating the range, then released his second arrow, his hand coming smoothly up and back to seize yet another.

The terzal reared to its full height, its paws stretching up and out Great, hooked claws extended themselves from the pads. With a roaring scream, the beast started forward.

Then the scream became a choking gurgle as two more arrows abruptly sprouted from the base of its throat.

Lanko spun, took three fast steps, then wheeled around again, another arrow at the ready. On the other side of the attacking beast, Banasel stood, prepared for further action.

The terzal weaved on his hind feet, obviously putting all the force of his being into an effort to retain his balance and to continue his slashing attack. Suddenly, he staggered, then fell stiffly forward, his forequarters scattering the fire.

Lanko slid his long knife out of his sash.

"Get some water and put this fire out," he said. "I'll make sure of him."

Cautiously, he advanced, the knife at the ready. Then he leaped forward and thrust the blade deep into the terzal's neck, twisting his wrist as he lunged forward. He jumped back.

The animal's shoulder jerked, then was still. A quick spurt of blood caused a hissing cloud of smoke to come from the hot embers beneath the thick neck. Then the gaping wound lay open, merely oozing a sluggish flow. Lanko nodded.

"Got him. Now, all we've got to do is get the pelt off. Might keep some of the meat, too."

Banasel came back, a skin bucket in his hand. He sloshed water over the fire, then stepped back, looking down at the huge carcass.

Stretched out as it was, the animal was almost four meters long. Except for the red of its paws, its facial mask, and its dark brown tail, it was a creamy white. Banasel nodded approvingly.

"Beautiful pelt, all right." He frowned.

"Hey, look," he complained. "This brute wrecked our supper. Now, we'll have to start all over—and that was going to be a good stew, too."

Lanko grinned at him. "You can't have everything," he said. "Besides, you'll have to admit, he gave us material for a lot more stew than he ruined." He looked down at the carcass thoughtfully.

"The only trouble is, that pelt's going to hang some extra weight on us. And I hate to waste all that good meat, too."

He looked around at the scrubby trees.

"Oh, well, we don't have far to go. All we've got to worry about is their local detectors." He smiled.

"That and the rest of this mountain."

Banasel stepped back, looking toward the mountain top. "Yeah," he agreed. "We should be in their blind area now. But this last few kilometers is just about straight up."

Lanko bent over the terzal, knife in hand.

"That it is. How about building some more chow? I'll take this thing apart while you're at it."

They finished their meal and put out the fire as the sun dropped below the surrounding peaks. Banasel looked up as Lanko stretched out and wrapped his sleeping furs around him.

"Funny thing," he remarked. "When I was a kid, back in Jogurth, I heard a lot about fur hunting. Even thought about going up into the hills myself. But then I got myself apprenticed to that metalsmith, and . . . well, anyway . . ." He looked up at the darkening sky.

"This last season, we've made more money than I ever saw before," he went on. "And the funny part is, now I've got no use for it."

Lanko yawned. "Sure. We're both good fur hunters—now. But where'd we learn the tricks we used to make all this profit? Kids in Jogurth—or Karth, either—don't get that kind of training. Neither, for that matter, do these mountain youngsters." He smiled.

"Look. When we left school, you held the Archery championship for Aldebaran Base, remember? And do you remember what a lousy shot you were when you started training?"

"Yeah. I thought I was pretty good, too." Banasel chuckled. "I was—according to the standards I knew then. Come to think of it, there are some other things, too."

"You're so right. For example, suppose that headman's son, back at Denra-kar had tried that little trick on you—say ten years ago?"

"Hah! I'd have torn into the guy right then and there. Imagine

some jerk putting the bite on a guy for his whole pack of skins, just on pure nerve." Banasel paused thoughtfully.

"Of course, things being the way they were, I'd have had the whole village on my neck—if that joker hadn't chopped me up for hash first. Could have been a little disastrous."

"Couldn't it? His old man had those villagers pretty well under control."

Banasel laughed shortly.

"That got changed."

"Sure it did—after we gave 'em a short course in dirty politics. But where did we learn the psych techniques that pulled that off? And where do you suppose I learned the knife tricks that gave the old boy a good look at his son's internal economy?"

Banasel sighed. "Yeah. So they taught us plenty. But those birds up there aren't quite that easy."

Lanko squirmed into a more comfortable position.

"They haven't spotted us yet," he said. "At least, they haven't picked us up Of course, we can't use any radiating equipment, but we can still sneak up the hard way." He looked up at the peaks.

"Anyway, we're more than half way through our problem. We've got 'em pin-pointed. And we know where their blind spot is, too. We're right in it."

'Still going to be a tough climb." Banasel curled up more tightly in his skins.

"Personally, I'm going to get plenty of sleep. The next couple of days could be rough."

Lanko watched his companion relax, then stretched himself out, thinking of the problem in hand.

There had been that last day—back at Aldebaran Base, after graduation. He and Banasel had found themselves facing the Commander. A-Riman had looked about the group of graduate trainees, then smiled.

"Gentlemen, your formal training is finished. And we think it's been adequate. We think you've done highly acceptable work, and we think you've become competent guardsmen. But we must be

absolutely certain of your technical training and we intend to give you a final check. Your final test is ready-made, in fact." The smile had broadened.

"I am told the Philosophical Command has sometimes been referred to as the 'Phlimflam Crowd,' and I'll have to admit there's occasionally some justice to that nickname. There are times when we even play sneaky tricks on each other. Like the task you are about to go out on.

"Our planetary bases operate at all times under full security. For obvious reasons, we don't want too many people to know of our presence. In fact, we are not at all anxious to advertise our very existence in a good many places. So I think you'll agree with me that anyone who can pin-point and penetrate a Philo base could be said to be expert in Command procedure and tactics." He paused, looking at the group before him.

"Gentlemen, this is your assignment. You will report to your team chiefs by confronting them in person at their own perimeters without previous notice of your coming. To do this, you will have to pilot yourselves to your systems. You will enter those systems without notification and you will evade any patrols or quarantine monitors that may be placed about your planets. This is the first phase—the easy part, actually.

"Upon making planetfall, you will turn your ship over to the pilot who will accompany you. During the trip, he will act purely as an observer. After planetfall, he will secure the ship, remaining in full phaseout and waiting for you to complete the remainder of your assignment.

"You will debark and pin-point the hidden Philo base on your planet and you will work out some method by which you can reach its inner perimeter." Again, the Commander looked from one side of the group to the other.

"Needless to say, gentlemen, you will do all this without being picked up by your team mates. If you are picked up, you will return here for further training."

Lanko sighed. Of course, there had been more to the talk than

that. But there was the problem. He tilted his head, to look up at the dimly silhouetted peaks.

It had taken them a long time, he thought. There had been times when they had been forced to call on every bit of knowledge they had been given—and there had been times when both of them had wondered if there wasn't something they'd missed—some answer that would make things go better. Like right now.

That base up there could be reached, of course. Team members came and went often. He'd traced their courses with the gravito-inertia meter, picking up the modulations of their body shields as they soared in over the peaks and flashed down into the main shield. That was simple. But neither he nor Banasel knew the necessary signs, countersigns, and coded modulations. If they tried to fly in, they'd be in tractor stasis before they knew what had happened.

He shrugged. Once they got close enough, of course, they could analyze the base shield and pick up the modulation in use. But there'd still be challenge and answer and all he'd have to do would be to snap in a detail analyzer or vocal decoder and every detector on the peak would go mad.

He yawned.

"Well," he told himself, "we've got everything damped out. Even our thoughts are shielded. Only thing we've got to worry about now is keeping out of sight—and inside the clutter zone of their mass detectors." He relaxed, willing himself to sleep.

During the next day, they released their pack animals, cached most of their possessions, and started using breathing equipment. Little by little, they worked their way over escarpments, up rock faces, and over snow fields until they reached the main summit of Zalu-si. At last, only the final spire remained. They made camp for the night under a ledge.

As the sun once more penetrated into their shelter, Lanko stirred and forced himself to his feet.

"This is getting into the hard work stage," he complained. "I suppose I got some rest last night, but I'd never know it."

Banasel adjusted his face mask. "Take the way you feel," he advised, "and make it twice as bad. That's me." He walked from under the ledge and stood, looking up at the sheer mass of rock above him.

"We're supposed to climb that thing?"

"Know a better way?" Lanko stepped back, examining the weathered stone.

"There are a few handholds." He pointed.

"Once we get up there about twenty meters, we can use that chimney. It'll get us almost to the top. Looks as though its rough enough up there so we can find something to hang onto." He frowned.

"I don't like that overhang, though. Maybe we can work our way around and find a break in it."

Banasel looked up.

"Looked pretty solid last night." He snorted. "Rhythm climbing! Sounds nice, but that's a long way down."

Lanko grinned. "No problem. If you come off, you can use your shield. That'll keep you from breaking anything."

"Sure! Sure it will." Banasel looked disgusted. "Get the both of us shipped back to Aldebaran, too. That's no solution." He sighed.

"Well, there's one consolation. This wind makes so much noise we can beat pins into that rock all day and they won't hear a thing."

He checked his equipment, then strode over to the rock.

"Well, might as well have at it."

Lanko watched him as he swung from hold to hold, testing each rock as he gripped it. At last, he followed.

The chimney proved to be an easy climb. But the overhang at the top turned out to be even more difficult than it had seemed from below. Slowly, they worked their way around under it, examining the rock above them. Finally, they stopped. Banasel shook his head.

"It ain't good," he said decidedly. "This is the best looking spot we've found and this one's impossible. This thing looks as though

someone had deliberately hacked it out to make approach impossible."

Lanko turned, looking at him thoughtfully.

"Come to think of it, I know just the guy that'd think of something like that," he said. "And he's just a few meters away from us, right on top of this rock pile"

"So what do we do now? We aren't going over this thing."

Lanko shifted his weight, resting against a small outcrop and looking down at the valley several kilometers below. He smiled.

"Just occurred to me," he remarked. "A guy could push himself off right here and he wouldn't hit a thing till he got to the valley floor."

Banasel looked down.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Make quite a splash." He turned again, to look unhappily at the cornice-like ledge above.

"So, what do we do about this hunk of heavy construction? Holler 'uncle'?"

Lanko allowed his head to rest against the rock.

"I don't know. I'll be hanged if I'll holler 'uncle' now. Maybe we can find a flaw and pry a few chunks away with our pins."

Banasel grinned. "Just what I've always wanted! Always wondered how it'd feel to have a couple tons of rock smack me in the teeth. I . . .

Lanko held up a hand, then put his ear against the rock.

"Hey, I wonder!" He dug around in his pocket and produced a small microphone and an earplug. He pressed the microphone against the rock and listened intently. At last, he looked at Banasel.

"Just happened to remember something that came up in class one day. We were talking about the reflective qualities of a full shield. Seems as though the shield acts like a reverberator sometimes. And if you've got a nice hunk of solid rock, you've got good sound conduction. Seems to work, too." He held out the earplug.

Banasel took it and listened. There were scraping sounds, then a voice sounded.

"Millar is checking that out now, sir. I expect him to . . ."

Banasel jerked the earplug away.

"I know that voice," he said. "Our boss, no less." He raised a shoulder and held out one hand.

"Maybe we could holler back at him. Would that constitute a confrontation within the meaning of the problem?"

Lanko smiled. "They might let us get away with it," he conceded, "but if I know Manir Kal, he'd be giving us the works about it for years." He shook his head.

"Huh uh. What with this little hearing aid and a few other little things, we're going to give him the business."

"Oh? That thing won't punch any holes in solid rock."

"No, but I've got an idea. Think you can feel out the modulation code without turning on any shield power?"

Banasel looked scornful. "At this distance? I've got my graveto, haven't I?"

"All right, let's get the settings. In the meantime, I'll do some eavesdropping. Bet I'll learn something we can use if I wait long enough." Lanko relaxed, his eyes vacant.

Banasel nodded in comprehension then occupied himself with his indicator, slowly tracing and timing out the variations in the energy screen just above him. Finally, he looked up.

"Got it," he said. "We can phase that screen any time we want to." He held out the instrument.

"There are the settings."

Lanko examined the face of the instrument, then nodded. He pushed his sash aside and made a few careful adjustments to his control belt, then went back to his listening.

Banasel watched him for a while, then sighed and turned his attention to the vast panorama of the valley.

Far below, the trees and grass of the valley looked like a tapestry, its details dimmed by age. Surrounding peaks jutted up, their naked rock and snow seeming to have been violently thrust through the smooth mantle of vegetation.

To his right were the reds, whites and purples of other great peaks of the armored backbone of the continent. And in the dis-

tance, he could make out the sprawling towers and buildings of Atakar, the one-time City of the Plain. He shook his head.

"Wild country up here," he told himself. "But people live here. And some of them live pretty well." He looked back at his companion.

Lanko was nodding in satisfaction.

"Knew they'd come up with sign and countersign sooner or later," he said happily. "And I've got Millar's designation, too. We're in business."

Banasel nodded. "All right," he said. "Now, what?"

Lanko waved a hand. "We go in," he said, "by the front door. All we've got to do is phase together and stay close. I can make noises like Millar easily enough." He looked down.

"If we move fast enough, we can be on deck and on the wrong side of a peak before they pick up direction on us—especially since we'll be modulated in phase with them. Then, we can come up over the hills and report in—just like a returning patrol. Sound good?"

Banasel looked down at the valley.

"Long dive," he remarked. "Well, it beats sitting here for the rest of our lives. I'll go first and lock to you as you go by." He eased himself up, then sprang out into space.

Lanko watched his twisting form for an instant, then drove himself violently away from the rock.

The wind plucked at him, causing him to tumble over and over. His universe became a kaleidoscopic mixture of mountain, sky and far away ground. He spread his arms and legs, managing to stabilize his drop. Then he reached to his belt with his right hand and waited. The ground came closer. Now, he could identify individual trees as they rushed toward him. Abruptly, he pressed a stud on his belt.

The motion of the trees slowed, then stopped. He hovered over them, nearly touching the topmost branches. Then he punched another stud and turned, skimming close to the ground and rapidly approaching the base of the mountain on the far side of

the valley. He swept around it, turned, then gained altitude, holding his course so he was almost skimming the rocks as he went up. The fall from Zalu-si had been fast, but now he forced his shield drive to exceed free-fall velocity.

As he cleared the top of the mountain, he climbed still higher, then touched his transmitter controls.

"Kazar," he said, "this is three one two. Coming in."

"This is Kazar. Skyline."

"Convention," replied Lanko.

"What's up, Millar? You're ahead of schedule."

"This one's hot. I'll have to report it in person." Lanko grinned to himself.

"Come in." The faint rush of the base transmitter died.

"Hope Banasel got locked in all right," Lanko told himself. "No time to check now, though."

He swept to the peak he had kicked himself away from a few moments before, then eased to the ground as his shield synchronized with the base shield. Quickly, he kicked his hand down and cut his power. Then he looked around quickly. Banasel stood beside him. He sighed in relief.

Manir Kal was coming out of a cave mouth. He looked searchingly at the two men who came toward him, then shook his head.

Lanko brought his hand up.

"Resident Guardsmen Lanko and Banasel reporting for duty, sir, as ordered."

Automatically, Manir Kal returned the salute.

"Didn't expect you this way," he admitted. "But I'm glad to have you on Base." He turned.

"They did it, Captain," he said. "So help me, they pulled it off. I'll buy you that dinner soon's we get 'em briefed and turn operations over to them."

11

THROUGH THE NARROW STREETS leadings to the great plaza of Karth, swarmed a colorful crowd—buyers, idlers, herdsmen, artisans, traders. From all directions they came, some to gather around the fountain, some to explore the wineshops, many to examine the wares, or to buy from the merchants whose booths and tents hid the cobblestones of the plaza itself.

A caravan wound its way through a gate and stopped, the weary beasts standing patiently as the traders sought vacant space that they might open business. From another gate, a herdsman guided his living wares through the crowd, his working animals snapping at the heels of the flock, keeping it together and in motion.

Musa, trader of Karth, sat cross-legged before his shop, watching the scene with quiet enjoyment. Business was good in the city and his was pleasingly above the average. Western caravans had come in, exchanging their goods for those eastern wares he wished to clear from his shelves. Buyers from the city and from the surrounding hills had come to him, to exchange their coin for his goods—both eastern and western. Yes, so long as this summer might last, business would be good.

He glanced back into the booth, examined the interior, then, satisfied with what he saw, resumed his casual inspection of the plaza.

There were customers in plenty. Men stopped, critically examined the contents of the displays, then moved on, or stayed to bargain. One of these paused before Musa, his eyes dwelling on the merchant rather than on his wares.

The shopper was a man of medium height. His rather slender,

finely featured face belied the apparent heaviness of his body, though his appearance was not really abnormal. Rather, he gave the impression of being a man of powerful physique and ascetic habits. His dress was that of a herdsman, or possibly of an owner of herds from the northern Galankar. His age was not so easily to be told.

Musa arose, to face him.

"Some sleeping rugs, perhaps, or a finely worked bronze jar from the East?"

The stranger nodded. "Possibly I might find something to my liking here. But I would like to look a while if I may."

Musa stepped aside, waving a hand. "You are more than welcome, friend," he assented. "Perhaps some of my poor goods may strike your fancy."

"Thank you." The stranger moved inside.

Musa stood at the entrance, watching him. As the man stepped from place to place, Musa noted that he seemed to radiate a certain confidence. There was a definite aura of power and ability. This man, the trader decided, was no ordinary herdsman—if, indeed, his business had to do with herds at all.

"You own herds to the North?"

The stranger turned, smiling. "Lanko is my name," he said. "Yes, I come from the North." He swept a hand to indicate the merchandise on display, and directed a questioning stare at the merchant.

"It seems strange that you display nothing of the West. I see only goods of the East in your shop."

Normally, Musa kept his own council, convinced that his affairs were not public property, but his alone. There was something about this man, Lanko, however, which influenced him to break his usual reticence.

"I plan a trading trip to the Eastern Sea," he confided. "Of course, to carry eastern goods again to the East would be a foolish waste of effort, so I am reserving my western goods for the caravan and clearing out the things of the East."

Lanko nodded. "I see." He pointed to a small case of finely worked jewelry. "What might be the price of those earrings?"

Musa reached into the case, taking out a cunningly worked pair of shell and gold trinkets.

"These come all the way from Norlar, where they have arts and materials found in no other place," he said. "Here is a type of jewelry rarely seen here, and thus, most valuable." He paused, looking admiringly at the baubles.

"For these, I must ask no less than twenty balata."

Lanko whistled softly. "No wonder you would make a trip east. I wager there is profit in such as those." He pointed.

"What of the sword up there?"

Musa laughed. "A price of twenty balata frightened you away from your desire, then you point at that?"

He crossed the tent, taking the sword from its rack. Drawing it from its scabbard, he pointed to the unusually long, slender blade.

"This, too, comes to us from Norlar. But it was not made there. No, before it came to Norlar, it had a long journey from the shop of a smith who makes his home far across the Great Sea." He gripped the blade, flexing it.

"Look you," he commanded, "how this blade has life. Here is none of your soft bronze or rough iron from the hills of Jogurth—no heavy, dull-edged club from the Korei Kran. Here, we have living metal that will sever a hair, yet not shatter on the hardest helm."

Lanko examined the steel with interest. "You say this sword was made beyond the Great Sea? How, then, came it to Norlar and thence here?"

Musa shook his head. "Of this, I am not so sure—yet," he confessed. "It is rumored that the priests of the sea god, Kondar, by praying to their deity, are guided across the sea to lands unknown."

"Taking with them, perhaps, traders?"

"So it is said."

"And you plan to journey to Norlar to verify this rumor? Possibly, even, to see for yourself these lands beyond the Sea?"

Musa stroked his beard. Could this man, he wondered, read a person's thoughts?

"Yes," he finally admitted, "I had that in mind."

"I see." Lanko reached for the sword. As Musa handed it to him, he extended it toward the rear of the booth, whipping it in an intricate sabre drill. Musa watched, curiosity growing in him. An experienced and expert swordsman himself, he had thought he knew all of the sword arts. But here were movements he could not follow. The sword flexed, singing as it cut the air, seeming to become a part of its wielder's arm. Abruptly, Lanko lowered the point.

"Merchant, I think I like this sword. What would its price be?"

Musa felt sudden disappointment. Here was a man who showed almost supernatural knowledge of people, and skill in a most useful art—that of the swordsman. And yet, with a few words he had revealed himself as a mere tyro in the even more important art of bargaining. He frowned.

No person of knowledge merely walked into a shop and announced his desire for a certain article. This would be most foolish —even a sort of insult to the ability of the merchant. Instead, one feigned indifference. One picked over the wares casually, disparagingly.

Mere prudence demanded that a man look at many items, perhaps sometimes asking a price. Possibly he might even make play at bargaining for some unwanted thing, merely to test the temper and skill of the vendor. He would make comments about robbery —about those things seen in other merchants' booths which were so much better and so much more sensibly priced.

Even, he might start to leave the shop, saying he could see nothing to tempt his taste. Then, if he wanted an article, he would allow himself to be reluctantly persuaded to remain.

Musa had even known skilful shoppers who were able by some trick to induce the merchant to select and show the wanted article. This was high art. He growled to himself.

But here was this man, who at first gave the impression of great

experience and knowledge. Obviously, he wanted the sword. Obviously, he knew—or perhaps cared—little of the art of the market.

"Well," Musa told himself, "a profit is a profit. We'll make the most of it." He shrugged.

"Nine hundred balata," he stated definitely, imitating the frank directness of the unusual shopper—and doubling his asking price in the process.

Lanko was examining the hilt of the sword. He snapped a fingernail against the blade. There was a musical ping.

"You must like this bit of metal far better than I," he commented without looking up. "I like it only a hundred balata worth. It would make an interesting curiosity—but one does not pay dearly for such as that."

Musa felt relief. Here was, at least, an appreciation of value—and a return to the more normal ways of doing business.

"A hundred!" he cried. "Why, this is hardly enough to pay the craftsman's apprentice. There is yet the master smith. And there are those who have labored and taken great risk to bring this sword to you, that you may look and admire." He smiled, his eyes remaining alert.

"No, friend, if you want this prince of swords, you must expect to pay for it. One does not . . ." He paused.

Lanko was sheathing the weapon, his whole bearing expressive of unwilling relinquishment.

Musa slowed his speech to a thoughtful cadence. "Still," he said softly, "I am, after all, closing out the things of the East. Perhaps I could make it eight and a half. Yes, suppose we make it eight hundred fifty."

"I don't know. Now, if you should say a hundred twenty . . ." Lanko held the sheathed sword up, turning it to the light to inspect the leather work.

The bargaining went on. Outside, the crowds in the street thinned and people started away for their evening meals. The sword was inspected and re-inspected. It slid out of its sheath and back again. From time to time, it bent and sang in some intricate

pattern of moves which left Musa confused and uneasy with its strangeness. Finally, he sighed.

"Well, all right. Make it two hundred fifty and I'll go to dinner with you." He shook his head in a perfect imitation of despair.

"May the wineshop make some profit from this afternoon's work. I cannot."

• 12

"HOUSEWIFE, this is Watchdog. Over."

The man at the workbench looked around. Then he laid his tools aside and picked up a small microphone.

"This is Housewife," he announced.

"Coming in."

The workman clipped the microphone to his jacket and crossed the room to a panel. He threw a switch, looked briefly at a viewscreen, then snapped another switch.

"Screen's phased," he reported. "Come in, Lanko."

An opening appeared in the wall, to show a fleeting view of a bleak landscape. Bare rocks jutted from thick ice, which was kept clear and shining by shrieking wind. Extreme cold seemed to flow into the room, like some all-pervasive liquid. A man swept through the opening and the wall resumed its solidity behind him.

He stood for an instant, looking around, then shrugged off a light robe and started shedding equipment.

"Hi, Pal," he was greeted. "How are things down Karth way?"

"Nothing exceptional." Lanko shrugged. "The area's getting so peaceful and quiet, it's monotonous." He unsnapped his accumulator and crossed the room to hook it to the power generator.

"No wars or rumors of wars," he continued. "The town's getting

moral—very moral. It's getting dull, in fact—and developing into a major center of commerce." He kicked off his sandals, wriggled out of the baggy native trousers, and tossed his shirt on top of them.

"No more shakedowns. No more monkeying with tax money. The whole system's working the way it was originally intended to. And merchants are flocking in."

He walked toward the wall, flicking a hand out. An opening appeared and he ducked into it.

"Be with you in a minute, Banasel," he called over his shoulder. "Like to get cleaned up."

Banasel nodded and went back to the workbench. He picked up a small part, examined it, touched it gently a few times with a soft brush, and replaced it in the device he was working on. He tightened it into place and was working with another component when a slight shuffle announced his companion's return.

"As a matter of fact," said Lanko, "the whole Galankar's getting almost too ethical. Have to run out a report on this last swing. Maybe we've overdone things a little."

"Oh, I don't know." Banasel grinned. "There's still a little legitimate chicanery. Most of the merchants still operate on the principle of caveat emptor, you know. And the shipowners at Konassa can take a big chunk out of any merchant that does soften up. Keeps 'em on their toes." He shrugged.

"And we still have a bandit or two running around loose, just to prevent the traders from getting fat and lazy."

"Yeah." Lanko smiled. "Even the best of civilizations need some irritant—they tell me." He moved toward a bench and sat down, stretching his legs out.

"Oh, yes. Speaking of traders, I met your old pal, Musa. He's doing right well for himself."

Banasel swung around. "Haven't seen him since we joined the Guard. He's getting pretty old, isn't he?"

Lanko shook his head. "He was a lot younger than the rest of us, remember? No, he's in pretty hearty middle age. Looked as

though he could still be a pretty rough character if someone really wanted an argument."

"What's he doing?"

"Trading." Lanko swung around and opened a wall locker, gazing critically at the clothing within. "He set up shop with that load of goods we gave him. It looks as though he did some pretty shrewd merchandising, too. Has a fancy assortment of goods on hand." He grinned.

"But his feet are itching. He's planning a trip over the Eastern Sea. Hinted at a rumor of a highly developed culture out past Norlar."

"Nothing out there for thousands of kilos," growled Banasel, "except a few little islands. No civilization of any note till you get clear over to the other continent. What is it the natives there call it?"

"In which dialect?" Lanko laughed. "Of course, there's the coastal area, around Kneuros. Last time I looked, it was Knoatakia."

Banasel nodded impatiently. "That'll do. Anyway, I can't show you what I mean because the scanner's down for cleaning, but there isn't even an island worth bothering about until you get a thousand K's or so out of Norlar. And if you should try sailing out of Norlar without a flock of navigational gear and a good almanac, you'd be in real trouble. No fixed stars, and you know what a cockeyed figure this planet of ours uses for an orbit. Currents and wind are something less than no help at all. They'd put you into a nice, big circle. Ship's crew could starve to death out there and never see a thing but water." He spread his hands.

"So how are these people going to commute between Norlar and Knoatakia?"

"I know what you mean," Lanko assured him. "We haven't checked over that way for several years, but I still remember. I didn't put it exactly the way you did, of course, but I did ask Musa how he planned to get over the Eastern. And he had an answer all ready for me." He paused, gathering up his discarded garments.

"I didn't like the answer too well, either," he added.

"It looks as though something's been going on we haven't noticed. Been too busy with our own garden patch, I'm afraid. There seems to be a new priesthood at Norlar I didn't know about, and they've got something. It's all wrapped up in religious symbology and they don't let any detail get out, but they are guiding ships out to sea and they're bringing them back again, loaded with goods that never originated in the Galankar—or the Plains of Jogurth, either."

He hung up the last article of clothing and turned, a sheathed sword in his hand.

"For instance, take a look at this thing Musa sold me." He extended the hilt toward Banasel. "I never saw anything like it on this planet before now. Did you?"

Banasel accepted the weapon, drawing it from its scabbard. He examined the handwork on the hilt, then snapped a fingernail against the blade. As he listened to the musical ping, he looked at the weapon with surprised interest. Gently, he flexed it, watching for signs of strain. Lanko grinned at him.

"Go ahead," he invited. "Get rough with it. That's a sword you've got in your hand, Chum, not one of those bronze skull busters."

Banasel extended the sword, whipping it violently. The blade bent, straightened, then bent again as it slashed through the air.

"Well," he murmured. "Something new."

He put the sword on the workbench and took an instrument from a cabinet. For a few minutes, he busied himself taking readings and tapping out data on his computer. Then he sat back, looking at the sword curiously.

At last, he glanced at the computer, then put the test instrument he had been using back in the cabinet, taking another to replace it. After taking more readings, he looked at the computer again, then shook his head, turning to Lanko.

"This," he said thoughtfully, "is an excellent piece of alloy steel. Of course, it could be accidental, but I don't know any place

on this planet where they'd have the equipment to work it up, even at that. There's a lot of technology involved here." He held the sword away from him, looking at it critically.

"But let's assume an accidental alloy. Then, we'll have to assume another accident in getting precisely the right heat before quenching. And there'd have to be some smith who ground and polished with such care as to leave the temper undisturbed while he got his finish. Oh, yeah. And some other guy would have to grind up some really fine abrasives for him. . . . Oh, it's possible, I suppose. But t'ain't likely. Musa told you this thing came from overseas?"

"To the best of his knowledge, it did. He got it from a trader who claimed to have a friend who had been on a voyage across the Eastern Sea. This guy had quite a stock of cutlery, Musa said."

Banasel leaned back, clasping his hands behind his head.

"You must have had quite a talk with Musa. Did he remember you?"

"Don't be foolish." Lanko shook his head. "You and I were blotted out of his memory, remember? And along with us, he's forgotten all about a lot of the things that happened around Atakar, way back when. He's got a complete past, all right, but we're no part of it." He smiled.

"No, he didn't know me. He has a booth in the Karth Market. I came through, just looking the place over. Recognized him, so I picked an acquaintance. Pulled him off balance and beat him way down on the price of this sword, but I still left him a respectable profit.

"He went to dinner with me, still bewailing the rooking I'd given him. Made up the difference on the chow, though. I told you —he's a trader, and a good one. We had a talk, certainly. But we were strangers. I just wasn't with it."

"Yeah." Banasel looked off into space. "Seems funny. You and I were both born on this planet. We were brought up here, and we had a lot of friends. Lot of people knew us at one time or another, but they've all forgotten and we really aren't with it any

more. Never existed, in fact. I know now what they mean by the 'lonely life of a guardsman.'"

He was silent for a time, then looked at his companion.

"Do you think these priests at Norlar might be in our line of business?"

"Could be," nodded Lanko. "There's a lot of seafaring out of Konassa. They cover the whole gulf of Manapor, and run up and down the coast. And we know of several other busy seaports. But no one in any of them has ever heard of navigation out of sight of land, let alone making a stab at it. Once in a while, some guy gets into strange waters, I guess. But he's just mourned for a while, then forgotten." He crossed to the workbench, picked up the sword, and stroked its blade.

"But then we find this thing. It doesn't belong, but it must have come from somewhere." He sighed.

"Normally," he mused, "technical knowledge gets around. Part of it's developed here, part there. Then someone comes along and puts the bits together. And someone else adds to it. And so on.

"Then there are other times when there's an abnormal source, or where there are unusual conditions, and knowledge can be very closely guarded. This might be one of those cases, and those priests might be working for some genius who worked out something and isn't about to let anyone else in on it till he's milked all the profits he can get. Or again, they might be fronting for someone very much in our line of business." He broke off.

"Any maedli hot?"

"Sure." Banasel picked a pot from the heater and poured two cups.

"Think we should set up a base near Norlar and have a look?"

"Probably be a good idea." Lanko accepted a cup, took a sip, and shook his head violently.

"Ouch! I said hot, not boiling." He blew on the cup and set it aside.

"These mountains have been an excellent base," he continued, "but this area seems to be developing perfectly. There's no outside

interference—that we've been able to detect. The degrader mess was cleaned up long ago, before Manir Kal pulled out. Nobody remembers anything significant about Atakar and her sudden flattening. The truth is, we've got very little excuse to hang around here." He picked up the cup again, cautiously sampling its contents.

"Oh, of course, there's that report Captain Kembar wanted on the development of the northern tribes. That'll take us a while, but we ought to move up around there to work that up. And he's not in any tearing rush for it, either.

"I'd say it's about time we moved around and checked the rest of the planet."

Banasel turned back to the workbench.

"Good idea," he agreed. "I'll get this scanner set up again and we'll be ready to load out." He picked up his tools.

"There's a plateau up on the northern slope," he went on. "We could set up there while we're making our study. Shouldn't take more'n half a cycle or so, should it?"

"No, I wouldn't think so." Lanko moved his head thoughtfully. "We'd better do that first. Then we can move on, over to Norlar. If I remember correctly, Norlar has a mountainous backbone. It's rugged and about as miserable as it can get, so no one ever goes up there. We should be able to set up with no trouble and that'll put us right on the island where we can look things over from close up."

• 13

On the western slope of the Midra Kran, a cloud of dust paced a caravan which crawled on its winding way over the trail toward the high pass. The treachery of the narrow path was

attested by an occasional slither—the rattle of falling stones—an occasional startled curse.

Musa stood in his stirrups, looking ahead at the long trail, which twisted up a mountainside, to disappear at the top of the pass.

On the other side of that high valley, he knew, the trail would become a torturous switchback, cut out of the rock and winding down the precipitous sides of steep cliffs—the only way down the nearly vertical eastern slope of the Midra Kran. At last, the switchback trail would straighten to blend into the road which led through the wastelands and into the wide plateau where he had been born—the great plain of Jogurth.

Still further, beyond the city of Jogurth and at the far edge of the plains, the Soruna Kran reared up, hindering his way to the Eastern Sea. And even further ahead, at the end of a thousand poorly marked trails, lay the island of Norlar, the sea, and the lands beyond.

He turned from his contemplation of the way ahead and looked back at the straggling caravan. Then he bent an admonitory glance on his companion.

"Better get them to close up, Baro. We'll be in a lot of trouble if some band of robbers catches us scattered like this."

The head caravan guard looked back, nodded, and turned his mount. Then he halted abruptly as shouts came from the rear of the line. Mixed with the shouting was the clatter of weapons.

"Come on," cried Musa. "Let's get back there fast. It's happened."

He kicked his mount in the ribs and swung about, starting up the steep bank to his left. The bandits would have bowmen posted to deal with anyone who might try to get back along the narrow path and he had no desire to test the accuracy of their aim.

As his beast scrambled up the bank, Musa saw a man standing on a pinnacle, alertly watching the center of the caravan. His guess had been right. The bandit leader's strategy had been to cut the caravan in two—to deal with the rear guard first. It was a logical

plan, for most of the goods of value were carried in the rear and center.

As the watcher on the point of rock started to aim his bow at someone down on the trail, Musa quickly raised his own bow to cut the man down before he could release his string.

The shot was good. The man made no sound as the arrow struck. He merely flinched, then lifted his face to the sky and clawed at his side futilely. His bow fell, then the man toppled and slid down the face of the rock he had stood on. Musa, followed by the advance trail guards, stormed up the slope.

They rode through a saddle in the hill, to find themselves confronted by a half dozen men who swung about, trying to bring their bows to bear on the unexpected targets. Two of these went down as arrows sang through the air. Then the traders were upon the rest, swords flailing.

One of the bandits swung his sword wildly at Musa, who held a twin to that blade he had sold back in Karth. The slender shaft of steel rang against the bandit's bronze blade, deflecting it. Musa made a quick thrust which passed through the man's leather shield, to penetrate flesh. The bronze weapon sagged and its holder staggered. Musa jerked back violently, disengaged his sword, and made a swift cut. For an instant, the bandit continued to sit his mount, staring at his opponent. Then he slumped and rolled out of his saddle.

The action had been fast. Only one bandit, a skilled swordsman, remained, to keep Baro busy. Musa rode quickly behind this man, thrusting as he passed. Baro looked across the suddenly lifeless body.

"Now what did you have to go doing that for?" he demanded. "I was having a good time with that one."

"Let's get down to the trail," Musa told him. "We can have real fun down there." He pointed.

The caravan's rear guard was in trouble. Several of the traders were in the dust of the trail and the few who still fought were being pressed by a number of determined swordsmen.

Baro wheeled and slid down the incline, closely followed by the rest of the group.

The surrounded bandits fought desperately, but hopelessly. The unexpected charge from the hill had driven them off balance and they were given no chance to recover. At last, Musa and Baro looked over the results of the raid.

They had lost several trail guards and drivers. One trader, Klaron, had been killed by an arrow launched early in the attack, and many of the survivors were wounded.

"We'll have to hire some more guards and drivers in the first village," said Baro. "But what will be done about Klaron's goods?"

"We can divide them and sell them in Jogurth," Musa told him. "Klaron has a brother back in Karth who can use the money, and money's a lot easier to carry than goods. You'll be taking a caravan back and you can look him up on your return trip."

Baro nodded. "Yes," he said. "I know where he is to be found." He turned away and started up the line, reorganizing the caravan.

At last, they got under way again and resumed their slow journey through the pass and on down to the Plains of Jogurth, where they rested by day and traveled by night, to avoid exertion during the day's heat.

They came to the city of Jogurth, which was a terminal for most of the caravan. From there, most of them would return to Karth after disposing of their goods and getting merchandise which would be of value in Karth, the other terminus of the trans-mountain trade route. Some, of course, would continue in their various directions, to penetrate into the farther reaches of the great plain. And others, like Musa, would go on to cross the Soruna Kran and complete further business on the seacoast before returning to the Galenkar.

Musa stayed in town for a few days, trading his few remaining eastern goods for locally produced articles and helping in the sale of Klaron's goods. At last, he joined another caravan, headed by an old trader named Kerunar, who habitually traveled between Jogurth and Monotro, on the east coast.

The mountains of the Soruna Kran were less forbidding than those of the Midra and the trip across them was uneventful. From the eastern slopes of this range, Musa at last saw the glint of the Eastern Sea. And finally, he drove his pack beasts into the seaport of Monotro.

His stay was short for he discovered that channel ships traveled often and he was able to guide his animals to the wharf, where his bales were accepted for shipment and he was able to book prompt passage. Leaving his goods, he led his small train of animals back to the market.

Old Kerunar shook his head when he saw Musa return.

"Be careful, friend," he cautioned. "I've been coming here for more than twenty years. Once, I traded in Norlar—before the priests of the god, Kondaro, gained power in Tanagor. Now, you couldn't get me over there for ten thousand caldor."

"Oh?" Musa looked at him curiously. "What's wrong?"

Kerunar looked at his newly set up booth. It was a large booth, hung with durable goods and trinkets from a dozen cities. There were articles even from far-off Telon, in the Gulf of Manapor. He looked back at Musa.

"Norlar," he declared, "has fallen into the hands of thieves and murderers. You can trade there, to be sure. You can even make small profits. But you can never be sure you will not excite the avarice of the Kondarans or arouse their anger. For they have a multitude of strange laws which they can invoke against anyone, and which they enforce with confiscation of goods. Slavery and death await any who protest their actions or question their rules." He paused.

"There are those who manage to trade and come back with profitable bales, of course. But others leave their goods in the hands of the priests of the sea god. Some remain, to find unrecorded death. But I do none of these things. I stop here, for I prefer to deal with those I can trust. When I face the thief or the bandit, I prefer even terms, with my weapons equal to his."

Musa looked about the market. "Here, of course," he acknowl-

edged, "I could find and get the goods of the far east. And here, I could find many of the goods from Norlar. But I would prefer to see these things at their source." He shook his head.

"No," he decided, "I shall make at least one trip."

"I'll give you a word of caution, then," he was told. "Whatever you see, make little comment. Whenever you are asked for an offering, make no objection, but give liberally. Keep your eyes open and your opinions to yourself."

"Thanks." Musa grinned. "I'll try to remember that."

"Don't just remember. Follow the advice if you wish to return."

Musa's grin widened. "I'll be back," he promised.

He turned away, leading his beasts to another plaza, where dealers in animals were to be found.

For the next few hours, he was busy with bargaining and discussion of the merits of pack beasts and their rightful prices. At last, his purse heavier than before, he made his way back to the wharf.

Once aboard the small channel ship, he hunted out a place to spread his sleeping rugs, then lay, listening to the preparations of the crew, who were readying their ship for the short voyage across the channel and into the mouth of the Kanothis river.

Musa slept fitfully, waking when the ship entered the harbor of Tanagor, chief seaport of the island empire of Norlar. He looked about him, noting that the island's river emptied into the sea, its mouth widening out to form a large harbor which was sheltered from open sea by a narrow cape, on which was built the city of Tanagor.

Near the cape, the harbor was full of shipping. Here were anchored huge, gold-trimmed red ships. These broad beamed, high sided ships now rested, their high masts bare, their golden sails furled. But these were the carriers of the trans-oceanic cargo which had so added to the prosperity of the island.

From wharves at the edge of the city on the cape, small galleys darted out toward these great cargo carriers, whose bulk prevented them from approaching too near the docks. At other wharves were

tied the smaller, yellow and white sailed ships which, like the one Musa was aboard, crossed the channel between mainland and the island empire.

Slowly, Musa's ship was warped in toward a dock, where a shouting gang of porters and stevedores awaited her arrival. Together with other passengers, Musa went to the rail, where he stood and watched the activity on the pier.

As he watched, four slaves, bearing a crimson-curtained litter, came to the wharf and stopped. The curtains opened and a man stepped out, to stride a few steps toward the intended mooring point. He was not a large man, nor did his face or figure differ from those of the normal islander. But his elegantly embroidered crimson and gold robes made him a colorfully outstanding figure, even on this colorful waterfront. And the imperious assurance of his bearing made him impossible to ignore.

He adjusted his strangely shaped, flat cap, glanced about the wharf haughtily, and beckoned to one of the slaves, who reached inside the litter and took from it an ornately decorated crimson chest. Another slave joined him and the two, carrying the chest with every evidence of reverent care, followed their crimson-cloaked master as he strode into a pier office.

Musa turned to one of the other merchants, his eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"A priest of Kondar," whispered the other. "In this land, they are supreme. Take care never to anger one of them, or to approach too closely to the sacred chest their slaves carry. To do so can mean prompt execution."

As Musa started to thank the man for his friendly warning, a cry of "Line Ho!" attracted his attention to the mooring parties. Lines had been cast aboard at bow and stern and the ship was rapidly being secured to stout bollards ashore.

A gang of stevedores quickly rigged a gangway amidships and porters commenced streaming aboard to carry the cargo ashore.

Another gangway was rigged aft for the passengers. At the foot of this, stood one of the priest's litter bearers, a slave dressed in a

crimson loincloth. In his hands, he held a large, red bowl, which was decorated with intricate gold traceries. Beside him stood his companion, a sturdy fellow who held a large, strangely shaped sword at his shoulder and frowningly surveyed the passengers as they passed him. Musa's former mentor leaned toward him.

"Don't forget or fail to put a coin in that bowl," he cautioned.

"How much?"

"The more the better. If you want quick passage across the Great Sea, better make it at least ten caldor."

Musa shrugged, reaching into his purse for a gold coin.

"Maybe I should start a priesthood myself, instead of working in the trading business," he told himself silently.

As he passed the bowl, he noted that the other trader dropped only a silver piece. On the wharf, the incoming passengers were being guided into groups. Musa noted that his group was the smallest and that his previous friend had gone to another, larger group. An official, tablet in hand, approached.

"Your name, Traveler?"

"Musa, trader, of Karth."

"You have brought goods with you?"

"I have thirty bales. They are marked with my name and city."

"Very good, Sir. We will hold them for your disposal. You may claim them at any time after midday." The man wrote rapidly on his tablet.

Musa thanked him, then turned to see how his shipboard acquaintance was progressing. He wanted further information from this man. Particularly, he wanted to ask him about gold and silver coins.

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He watched the older merchant as he completed his conversation with an official. As the man started to walk off the pier, Musa caught up with him.

At his approach, the other held up a hand.

"I know," he said. "Why did I tell you to make a generous offering, then put a small coin in the bowl myself? This is what you would like to know?"

"Precisely," Musa replied. "I'm not a poor man, of course, but I'm not some wealthy holiday seeker, either. This voyage has to pay."

The other smiled. "Tell me, would you have sought me out for more advice if I hadn't done something unusual?"

Musa tilted his head. "No," he admitted.

"So I did something that would make you curious—even make you annoyed enough to demand an explanation. Come into this wineshop and I'll tell you a story. It should be worth your time."

Over the drinks, the older man explained himself. An experienced island trader, he had been operating between the mainland and Norlar for thirty years and more. It had been a profitable business, for the island had been dependent upon the mainland for many staple items and had in return furnished many items of exquisite craftsmanship, as well as the produce of its extensive fisheries and pearl beds.

Then the prophet, Sira Nal, had come with his preachings of a great sea god, Kondaro, ruler of the Eastern Sea.

Tonda, the trader, told of the unbelief that had at first confronted the prophet and of the positive proof that Sira Nal had

offered when he had gathered a group of converts, collected enough money to purchase a ship, and made a highly successful voyage to distant lands to the east.

Upon his return, Sira Nal had found a ready market for the strange and wonderful products he had brought. Also, he had found many more converts for his new religion.

His original group, now a priesthood, were the only men who could give protection and guidance to a ship in a voyage past the sea demons who frequented the Eastern Sea. And they demanded large offerings to compensate them for their services.

It was only to be expected that a few adventurous shipowners would attempt to duplicate Sira Nal's feat without the aid of a priest. Several did, but no living man had seen their ships or crews again.

The profits from the rich, new trade, plus the alms of the traders visiting Tanagor, had rapidly filled the coffers of Kondaro. A great temple had been built in an unbelievably short time—some said with the aid of the god himself—and the priests had become more and more powerful, until now, only a few years after the first voyage of Sira Nal, they virtually ruled the island.

For some years, Tonda, a conservative man and a firm believer in his own ancestral gods, had paid little attention to this strange, new cult. Upon arrival at Tanagor, to be sure, he had sometimes placed small offerings in the votive bowl, but more often, he had merely strode past the slave of Kondaro and gone upon his affairs.

At last, however, attracted by the great profits in the new overseas trade, he had decided to arrange for a voyage in one of the great ships. Then he had learned of the efficiency of the priestly bookkeeping system.

The Great God, it appeared, had become incensed at Tonda's impiety during his many previous trips across the channel. A curse had been placed upon him and his goods.

Of course, if Tonda wished to do penance as a slave of Kondaro for a time, and to make votive offerings, amounting to about two thousand caldor, it might be that the Great God would relent and

allow his passage in a great ship, but this could be done only with new goods. His former possessions had been destroyed by the angry Kondaro in his wrath at Tonda's attempt to place them in one of the sacred ships.

Empty-handed, Tonda had returned to the mainland.

"But you continued to return, with more goods. Why were they not destroyed?"

Tonda smiled. "The wrath of Kondaro extends only to the Great Sea and to the ships that sail thereon. I cannot approach these, but trade here in Tanagor is profitable, so long as a man knows who to deal with." He paused, smiling as he sipped his drink.

"Sometimes, I think the priests like to have a few penitent sinners around to explain things to newcomers and to furnish examples of the power of Kondaro."

Musa smiled in response. "But so far, my ten caldor make me and my goods acceptable?"

Tonda looked around quickly, then turned a horrified face toward his protégé.

"Never say such things," he cautioned in a low tone of voice. "Don't even think them. It is your piety which makes you acceptable, so long as you continue in a way pleasing to the great Kondaro. The money means nothing. It is only the spirit of sacrifice that counts."

"I see." Musa's face was solemn. "And how else may I be sure I will remain acceptable?"

Tonda nodded approvingly. "I thought you were a man of good sense and prudence."

He launched into a description of the technicalities of the worship of Kondaro, the god of the Eastern Sea.

At length, Musa left his tutor and repaired to an inn, where he secured lodging for the night.

He arose the next morning and, in obedience to the advice given him by Tonda, he took his way toward the Temple of the Sea. As he threaded his way through the crowds already gathering

in the streets, he took note of the types and quality of merchandise displayed in the booths and hawked by the street peddlers.

Suddenly, one of these roving vendors approached him. In his hands, he held a number of ornaments.

"Good day to you, oh Traveler," he cried. "Surely, it is a fortunate morning for both of us."

With a deft gesture, he threw one of the trinkets, a cunningly contrived amulet, about Musa's neck.

Musa would have brushed the man aside, but the chain of the amulet had tangled about his neck and he was forced to pause while removing it.

"I told myself when I saw you," the man continued, "ah, Banasel, lad, here is one who should be favored by the gods. Now, how can such a one venture upon the Eastern Sea without a sacred amulet?"

Musa had slipped the chain over his head. He paused, holding the ornament in his hand.

"How, then, are you to know where I am going?"

"Oh, Illustrious Traveler," exclaimed the man, "how can I fail to know these simple things when it is given to me to vend these amulets of great power and fortune?"

In spite of himself, Musa was curious. He looked at the amulet appraisingly. The workmanship was superb. There was no question of the quality of the goods and his trading instincts took over.

"Why, this is a fair piece of work, at that," he said. "Possibly I could spare a caldor or two."

The man before him struck his forehead unhappily.

"A caldor, he says! One caldor! Why, the gold alone is worth ten."

Musa looked more closely at the ornament. The man was probably not exaggerating too much. Actually, he knew he could get an easy twenty-five balata for the bauble in Karth. A rapid calculation told him that here was a small profit from the skies.

"Why, possibly it is worth five, at that," he said. "Look, I'll even be generous. Shall we say six?"

"Oh, prince of charity! Thou paragon of generosity! After all, I must live, too." The man smiled wryly. "However, you are a fine, upstanding man, and one must take these things into account. I had thought to ask twenty, but we'll make it ten. Just the price of the gold."

Musa smiled inwardly. The profit was secured—even some of the sales patter might be valuable. But maybe . . .

"Suppose we make it eight and I'll give you my blessing with the money."

The man held out his hand. "Nine—and I'll bless you, instead."

Musa shrugged. "Very well, most expert of vendors." He reached into his purse.

Banasel hesitated before accepting the money. He looked Musa over carefully, then nodded as if satisfied.

"Yes," he said softly, "I was right." He paused, then addressed himself directly to Musa.

"It is not to everyone we may sell these enchanted amulets," he explained seriously. "We must be very careful, for they are talismans of the greatest of powers. The wearer of one of these need never fear the unjust wrath of man, beast, or demon, for he has powerful protectors at his call. Only wear this charm. Never let it out of your possession and you will have nothing to fear during your voyage. Truly, you will be most favored."

He looked sharply at Musa again, took the money, glanced at it, and dropped it into a pouch.

"You really do believe in the powers of your ornaments, then?" Musa showed his skepticism.

Banasel's eyes widened and he spread his arms in the air, then dropped them and lowered his head.

"To be sure," he said devoutly. "How can I believe else, when I have seen their workings so often?" He held up a hand.

"Why, I could spend hours telling of the powers these little ornaments possess and of the miracles they have been responsible for. None have come to serious harm while wearing one of these

enchanted talismans. None!" He spread his arms again, fixing Musa with an intense stare.

Musa looked at him doubtfully. "I should like to hear your stories sometime," he said politely.

He felt uncomfortable, as many people do when confronted by a confessed fanatic. His feelings were divided between surprise, a mild contempt, and an unease, born of wonder and uncertainty.

Obviously, this man was not especially favored. He was dressed as were the other street peddlers. He had besides, the slightly furtive, slightly brazen air of those who must avoid the anger—even the notice—of truly powerful people, and yet, who must depend upon their powers of persuasion for their living. But now he was talking grandly of the immense powers of the baubles he vended, seeming to hold them in a sort of reverent awe.

And when he had spread his arms—well, Musa had to admit to himself, there had been a short-lived but unmistakable hint of irresistible power barely held in check. He felt an uneasy tingling at the back of his neck.

"But I must go to the temple now, if I am to make arrangements for my voyage," he added apologetically. He turned away, then hurried down the street, his attitude eloquent of his relief at leaving the scene.

Banasel watched him go, a faint smile growing on his face.

"I don't blame you, pal," he chuckled softly. "I'd feel the same way myself."

He glanced around, noting a narrow alley. Casually, he strolled into it, then looked around carefully. No one could observe him here. He straightened, dropping the slightly disreputable, hangdog manner. Then he reached for his body shield controls.

Quickly, he modulated visibility out. Then he actuated the levitator modulation and arrowed out of the alley, rose high over the city, and headed toward the rugged mountains that formed the backbone of the island.

Lanko was waiting. He quickly lowered the base shield.

"Well," he asked, "how did it go?"

"Not too much trouble finding him." Banasel walked over to the cabinets and started storing the goods he had been carrying.

"Sold him a miniature communicator. Now, I hope he wears the thing."

"We'll have to keep a close watch on him," commented Lanko, "just in case he puts it in his luggage and forgets about it. Did you give him a good sales talk?"

"Sure. Told him to wear it always. I pawed the air, raved a little, and made him think I was really crazy. He didn't like it very well, but it made an impression and I've an idea he'll remember and grab the thing if he sees trouble coming."

Banasel put the last ornament in its place and started unhooking his personal equipment. At last, he turned.

"Look," he said. "Why bother with all this mystic business? We've got mentacoms and they taught us to use them. Why not just clamp onto our boy and keep track of him that way? It'd be a lot simpler. Less chance of a slip, too."

"Yeah. Sure it would." Lanko gave his companion a disgusted look. "But have you ever tried that little trick?" He sat up.

"We could try it, of course," he admitted, "but I know without looking what would happen. I tried something like that once. And I found out a lot of things—quick." He looked into space for a moment.

"How old are you, Banasel?"

"Why, you know that. I'm just about fifty."

Lanko nodded. "Just about my age. And our civilization is a few thousand years old. And our species is somewhat older than that. We were in basic Guard training, and later in specialized Command training. Been working at this sort of thing for a trifle over twenty years. That right?"

"Sure I remember every minute of it. Why?"

"Of course you remember. You had that kind of training. But did you ever wonder how old some of those young guardsmen we worked with might be?"

"Why, most of 'em were kids. Still a little rattleheaded—just fresh from school."

"That they were. But how many years—our years—had they spent in their schooling? How old were the civilizations they came from? How old were their species?"

Banasel looked thoughtfully across the room.

"I never thought of it that way. Why, I suppose some of their forefathers were worrying about trans-light astrogation before this planet was able to support life." He looked aside.

"And, come to think of it, I remember a few casual remarks. Like the guy that made some comment about 'just a period ago,' when he was starting citizen training."

"That's what I mean." Lanko nodded emphatically. "'Just a period.' Only ten or twelve normal lifetimes for our kind of people." He held out a hand.

"Oh, sure, the two of us got worked over some. We'll probably be around for quite a few generations yet. Might even be that some of these kids we see around will have grandchildren who'll look at us and give us fatherly advice. But by galactic standards, we're just about old enough right now to get well into basic schooling. They had to step things up in our training because even with special treatments, we wouldn't last long enough to get full citizen training." He smiled sadly.

"And remember, those civilizations are just as old compared to ours as they are compared to us. Maybe even older. They toss off comments about periods ago pretty casually, and during those periods, they learn.

"They practice with their minds so that finally, the older citizens of the galaxy can make full contact with them without fear of injuring them mentally. During the period that guy was talking about, he was learning concepts he wouldn't dare to even suggest to you or me. Finally, after a few more periods, he'll begin to become mature.

"Do you think we could pick up all the knowledge and training

back of his handling of technical equipment in a mere twenty years or so?"

Banasel looked at him thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "that ties in with the way Commander A-Riman always acted. I thought he was just sort of avoiding the inferiors." He grinned.

"Guess he was, at that. He didn't want to get absent minded and knock us loose from our moorings by some chance remark."

He reached up, taking the small circlet from his head. He held it in his hand, looking at it with increased respect.

"You know," he said, "I really hadn't thought of it. They taught me to repair these things, among other pieces of equipment, and most of the construction is simple and easy to duplicate—if you have certain parts and components. They taught me a few uses for the thing, and I thought I understood it." He shook his head.

"Of course, I knew we were in contact with an advanced culture, and I knew that most of those guys we treated so casually had something that took a long time in the getting, but I didn't stop to think of the real stretch of time and study involved." He leaned back, replacing the mentacom on his head.

"Somehow, they didn't make it very apparent."

"Of course they didn't." Lanko spread his hands. "One doesn't deliberately impress children with their inferiority."

"Yeah. Will we ever learn?"

"Some. Someday. But we've got a long, lonely road to travel first." Lanko stood and adjusted the communicator.

"Right now, though, we've got work to do We'd better keep tabs on Musa. If I'm not wrong, we'd better follow him when he ships out of here."

15

THE TEMPLE OF KONDARO, the sea god, had been built at the edge of a cliff so that it overlooked the Eastern Sea. The huge, white dome towered over and dominated the waterfront of Norlar, furnishing a daytime landmark for mariners far out at sea, while its torch provided a beacon to relieve the blackness of moonless nights. Here was the home of the crimson priesthood and the center of control for all who would sail to the east.

Musa stood for some time, admiring the temple and its grounds, then walked between carefully clipped hedges and up the long line of steps leading to the arched entrance.

Again, he stopped to admire the scene before him. Overhead, the vaulting ceiling of the main dome was lower than its outer dimensions would lead one to believe, but Musa hardly noticed that. He was gazing around the main rotunda.

It was predominantly blue. The dome was a smooth, blue sky and the smooth blueness continued down the walls. The white steps of the entrance terminated at the edges of a mosaic sea, which stretched to the far walls, broken only by a large statue of the sea god himself. Kondaro stood in the center of his temple, facing the entrance. One arm stretched out, the hand holding a torch, while the other arm cradled one of the great ships he had granted his favor. Beneath one foot, its face mirroring ultimate despair, lay one of the bat-like sea demons.

About the feet lapped conventionally sculptured waves, which melted into the mosaic, to be continued to the walls by the pattern of the tiles. At the far side of the rotunda, the double stairs, which led to bronze doors, were almost unnoticeable, seeming to be a vaguely appearing mirage on the horizon of a limitless sea.

The trader looked at the far side of the rotunda, then down, hesitating due to an overpowering feeling that he was about to walk on water. He turned, remembering the pedestal nearby. A crimson bowl rested on this stand and beside it was a slave in the crimson loincloth which marked the menials of Kondaro.

Musa stepped over to the pedestal, dropped a coin into the bowl, and walked toward the rear of the temple, making proper obeisance to the great statue. A young priest approached him.

"I crave blessings for a voyage I propose to take," announced the trader.

The priest inclined his head.

"Very well, Traveler, follow me."

He led the way to a small office. An older priest sat at a large table, reading a tablet. Conveniently placed were writing materials and on the table before him was another votive bowl. Musa dropped a coin into this bowl and the priest looked up.

"I bring a voyager, O Wise One," said the young priest.

"It is well," the older priest acknowledged in a deep voice. He turned to Musa.

"Your name, voyager?"

Musa gave his name, his age, the amount of his goods, and an account of his actions since his arrival in Tanagor. At the mention of Tonda, the priest nodded.

"The actions of Tonda have been most exemplary for the past several seasons," he remarked. "He is a good man, but he lacks the proper spirit of sacrifice." He concluded his writing.

"Well, then, Musa, you may go to those who sail ships with the benisons and blessings of Kondaro upon you. I shall only caution you as to the observance of the rites and of the laws for those who sail the Great Sea. Go now, in peace."

As Musa turned, the younger priest spoke.

"I will lead you to one who will give you further guidance," he said.

Musa followed him to another small room, where he met still another priest. This man, he discovered, was a shrewd trader in

his own right. He was familiar with goods and their values. And in addition to the rites he described, he offered definite advice as to what to take and what to leave behind. Fortunately, Musa discovered as he talked to this priest, he had picked very nearly as good a selection as he could wish.

During the days that followed, Musa made more votive offerings, practiced the rites ordered by the priest, and watched his goods as they were delivered to the Bordeklu, a ship belonging to Maladro, beloved of Kondaro—which is to say, a shipowner whose ships were permitted by the sea god and his priests to sail the Eastern Sea.

At last, the day arrived when Musa himself boarded the ship and set sail past the headland of Norlar.

As the ship was warped out of the harbor, Musa took stock of his fellow passengers. Among them were a slender, handsome man named Ladro, who had been on many previous voyages to the land of the East, and Min-taa, a native of the eastern continent, who was returning from a trading voyage to Norlar. There were several others, but they kept to themselves, seeming to radiate an aura of exclusiveness. Ladro and Min-taa were more approachable.

"Surely," thought Musa, "these two can teach me a great deal of the land I mean to visit, if they will."

He walked over to the rail, where the two stood, looking out over the shoreline. The ship was coming abreast of the great temple of Kondaro after having rounded the end of the cape.

"It's the most prominent landmark on the island, isn't it?" Musa commented.

"What?" Ladro turned, looking at him curiously. "Oh, yes," he said, "the temple. Yes, it's the last thing you see as you leave, and the first when you return." He paused, examining Musa. "This is your first trip?"

"Yes. I've always traded ashore before this."

"But you finally decided to visit Kneuros?"

"That's right. I've dealt with a few traders who had goods from there. Their stories interested me."

Ladro smiled. "Romance of the far places?"

"Well, there's that, too," Musa admitted, "but I'm more interested in some of the merchandise I've seen—and in the trade conditions I've heard about." He shrugged.

"One who trades at the source," he added, "often reaps the greatest share of the profit."

"Yes," agreed Ladro, "this trade has its profits. But you should know something about that already. How long have you been trading around Norlar?"

"This is my first trip. I'm from Karth, in the Galankar."

"You mean this is your first trip to Norlar?" Min-taa joined the conversation.

"That's right." Musa nodded. "I left Karth for the purpose of trading east of the Great Sea."

"Unusual," mused Min taa. "Most traders work between Tanagor and the mainland for several years before they try the sea."

"Yes," added Ladro, "and there are some who never go out. They satisfy themselves with the channel trade." He pointed.

"We're getting out to the open sea now, past the reefs."

The ship drew away from the island kingdom, setting its course toward the vague horizon. The day wore on, to be replaced by the blackness of night. Then the sky lit up again, heralding another day.

The ship's company had settled to sea routine and the traders roamed about their portion of the deck, talking sometimes, or napping in the sun. Musa leaned over the low rail, watching the water and admiring the clear, blue swells.

He raised his head as the door of the forward cabins opened. A priest, followed by a group of slaves, went up to the raised forecastle. Under the priest's direction, the slaves busied themselves putting up a high curtain of crimson and gold across the foredeck. They completed their task and went below.

Again, the door opened and a procession, headed by the chief priest, slowly mounted the ladder to the forecastle. Each of the three priests was followed by his slave, who bore a crimson casket.

The curtain closed behind them. After a few minutes, the slaves came out to range themselves across the deck, facing aft.

"I wonder," said Musa, turning to Ladro, "what ritual they are performing, that they dispense with their slaves."

Ladro shook his head. "The less a man knows of the activities of the priests, the better he fares," he declared. "Truly, on a great ship, curiosity is a deadly vice."

Musa nodded toward the stern. "I see that one of the priests is not at the bow."

"That is right. One priest always remains by the steersman, to ward off the spells of the sea demons." Ladro paused, pointing overside.

"See," he said in a pleased tone, "here is an envoy from Kondaro."

Musa's gaze followed the pointing finger. A large fish was cruising alongside, sliding effortlessly through the waves, and occasionally leaping into the air.

"An envoy?"

"Yes. So long as a kontar follows a ship, fair weather and smooth sailing may be expected. They are sent by Kondaro as guardians for those ships he especially favors."

At a call from the priest in the stern, two sailors appeared, carrying chunks of meat. As the priest chanted, they tossed these overside. The great fish rose from the water, catching one of the chunks as it fell, then dropped back. The water frothed whitely as he retrieved the other. He gulped the meat, then swam contentedly, still pacing the ship.

"Suppose someone fell overboard?" Musa gazed at the kontar in fascination.

Ladro and Min-taa exchanged glances.

"If one were favored by the Great One," replied Min-taa slowly, "it is believed that the kontar would guard him from harm. Otherwise, the sacrifice would be accepted."

Musa looked at the clear water, then glanced back to the spot of foam which drew astern.

"I don't believe I'll try any swimming from the ship." He backed a little from the rail, glancing quickly at Ladro and Min-taa, then looking away again.

He suddenly realized that he had exceeded his quota of questions and that he could make trouble for himself. He had noted that most of the ship's company appeared to know the other traders aboard, even though some of these had never been to sea. Min-taa and Ladro were obviously well acquainted with several of the ship's officers. But he, Musa, was a stranger.

He had already noted that the priesthood of Kondaro was not averse to a quick profit. And he had observed and been told that they placed a low value on the lives and possessions of others. He had dealt with tribes ashore who had the simple, savage ethic:

"He is a stranger? Kill him! Take his goods—and kill him."

Ashore, he had protected himself during his many trips by consorting with other traders of good reputation, and by hiring well recommended guards. But here? He remembered the remarks made by Kerunar, back in Monotro.

"When I face the thief or the bandit, I prefer even terms, with my weapons equal to his."

Slowly, he collected himself and looked at Ladro and Min-taa.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me," he apologized, "I have some accounts to cast, so I believe I'll go to my quarters." He turned and went below.

As he disappeared down the ladder, Ladro turned to his companion.

"Of course," he said thoughtfully, "if all goes well, this man will be most favored. But if the Great One shows signs of displeasure . . ."

Min-taa looked down at the sea for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes," he agreed, "I have heard of strangers who excited the wrath of Kondaro." His eyes narrowed speculatively.

"Those of the faithful who keep watch on such unfavored beings are well rewarded by the priests, I am told."

Ladro nodded. "I believe that is correct," he said calmly. "In any event, we should be watchful for impiety." He stretched. "Well, I think I shall take a short nap before dinner."

16

THE TRADERS' QUARTERS were cramped. There was a small common space with a table, over which hung a single light. Here, meals could be eaten after they had been brought from the galley a short way forward. The cabins were mere cubicles, curtained off from the common space, and sufficiently large for a bunk, a tiny, shelf-like desk, and sufficient space for the occupant to store his belongings and to move about and dress.

Musa cast a glance at the table, then went to his cubicle, closed the curtains, and sat down on his bunk.

Of course, he had no proof. There was no really logical sequence to prove that he was in a dangerous situation. There was no evidence that his fellow voyagers were other than honorable, well-intentioned men. But he simply didn't feel right. He pulled his wooden chest from under the bunk, opened it, and looked through the small store of personal effects.

There was no weapon here. The law of Kondaro forbade the carrying of those by other than the priests and their slaves. His attention was attracted by a glitter and he picked up the small amulet he had bought from that odd peddler in Norlar. Slowly, he turned it in his hands.

It was an unusual ornament, strangely wrought. He had never seen such fine, regular detail, even in the best handcraft. As he looked more closely, he could see detail that could have been done with none of the instruments he knew of. Yet, it must have been hand-made, unless it were truly of supernatural origin

He remembered the urgent seriousness of the peddler's attitude, and he could recall some of his words. The man had spoken almost convincingly of powerful protectors and Musa could foresee the need of such.

Too, he remembered, the man had put forth his strongest sales effort after the sale had been consummated. This was unusual.

He found himself speaking.

"Oh, power that rests in this amulet," he said, "if there is any truth in the peddler's words, I . . ." He paused, his usual hard, common sense taking over.

"This is silly!"

He drew his hand back to throw the ornament into the chest, then felt an irresistible command to stop—to retain the amulet in his possession. The compulsion grew and he dazedly secured the chain about his neck.

Feeling sick and weak, he tucked the ornament into his garments. Then, still moving in a daze, he left the cabin and returned to the deck.

The breeze made him feel a little better, but he was still shaken and his head ached violently. Little snatches of undefined memory tried to creep into his consciousness, but he couldn't quite bring them into focus.

"Well," commented a voice, "your accounts didn't take long."

Musa turned toward the rail. Min-taa was still there, looking at him. He smiled wanly.

"It was stuffy down there. I was forced to come up for some air."

Min-taa nodded. "It does get close in the quarters during the day." He pointed alongside.

"We are favored still," he said. "Another kontar has joined us."

Two of the great fish paced the ship, gliding and leaping effortlessly from wave to wave. Musa watched them.

"We must be favored indeed."

"Yes." Min-taa smiled. "May our favor last."

Masu's head still ached and the glitter of the sun's reflections

from the waves made it worse. He looked aft, to the faint line where sky met water. There was a low line of clouds. His gaze traveled along the horizon and he noted that the clouds seemed a little darker forward. Still, he felt uneasy and alone.

"See what I mean?"

"Ooh! Yeah. Yeah, I see. What a back-lash that was! I've got the grandfather of all headaches and I won't be able to think straight for a week. Wonder how Musa feels . . . ?

"But I got results, anyway."

"Yes. You got results. I got 'em once, too, when I tried something like that. But I'll live a long time before I try it again. How about you?"

"Don't worry. Next time I try to exert direct mental control on another entity, this planet'll have space travel. Wonder if some klordon tablets would help any."

"Can't do you any harm. Try one. Then, let's get going and scatter a few more communicators around on that ship. Be more practical than beating our brains out."

As the days passed, Musa became familiar with the shipboard routine and lost some of his early uneasiness regarding his traveling companions. He became acquainted with others of the traders, finding them to be average men, engaged in the same trade as he was. He talked to members of the ship's company. They, too, were normal men, who worked at their trade in a competent manner.

Only the four priests held aloof. Ignoring officers, sailors, and traders alike, they spoke only to their slaves, who passed their comments to the ship's company.

On the tenth morning, Musa came to the deck, to find the sea rougher than usual. Waves rose, scattering their white plumes for the wind to lift and carry. Ahead, dark clouds hid the sky and wind-driven spray came aboard, to spatter the deck and the passengers.

Just outside the cabin entrance, a small knot of traders were gathered. As Musa came out, they separated.

Musa went over to the rail, looking overside at the waves. The two kontars were not in sight. He looked about, noting the sailors, who hurried about the decks and into the rigging, securing their ship for foul weather. Close by, Ladro and Min-taa were talking.

"It is quite possible," said Ladro, "that someone aboard has broken a law of the great Kondaro and the kontar has gone to report the sin." He glanced at Musa calculatingly.

"Yes," agreed Min-taa. "We . . ."

An officer, hurrying along the deck, stopped. "All passengers will have to go below," he said. "We're in for bad weather, and we don't want to lose anyone overside."

"Could this be the wrath of Kondaro?" asked Ladro.

The officer glanced at him questioningly.

"It could be. Why?"

Again, Ladro cast a glance at Musa. Then he caught the seaman by the arm, pulling him aside. The two engaged in a low-toned conversation, directing quick glances at Musa. At last, the officer nodded and went aft, to approach one of the slaves of Kondaro.

Musa started across the deck to the ladder, his heart thudding painfully. Surely, he thought, he had done nothing to offend even the most particular of deities. Yet, the implications of Ladro's glances and his conversation with the ship's officer were too obvious for even the dullest to misinterpret. Musa took a long, shuddering breath.

His fears on that earlier day had been well grounded, then.

He gazed at the lowering sky, then out at the waves. Where could a lone, friendless man find help in this waste of wind and water? He felt of the outline of the amulet he still wore and smiled wryly. No peddler's sales talk could help in this situation.

Slowly, he climbed down the ladder leading to his tiny cubicle.

Once inside, he again started to check over his personal items. There was nothing there to help. Hopelessly, he looked at the collection in the chest, then he got out a scroll of prose and went

to the central table to read in an effort to clear his mind of the immediate situation.

Minutes later, he went back to his bunk and threw the scroll aside. Possibly, he was just imagining that he was the target of a plot. Possibly, there was a real god named Kondaro—an omnipotent sea deity, who could tell when persons within his domain were too curious, or harbored impious thoughts. Possibly, this sea god was capable of influencing the actions of the faithful—of giving actual instruction of some sort.

Possibly, his opinion of the priesthood and of the rites they prescribed had been noted and had given offense. Or, perhaps that peculiar little device he had seen a priest studying was capable of warning the god that it had been profaned by an unsanctified gaze. Possibly this storm was truly the result of such a warning. He was sure the priest hadn't seen him, but it could be that the device itself might . . .

Musa threw himself on his bunk.

There were all those possibilities, but he could believe in none of them.

A deep voice resonated through the space.

"Musa, of Karth," it said, "my master, Dontor, desires your presence on deck."

Musa stood. Two of the slaves of Kondaro had come into the cabin and stood, swords in hand, flanking his cubicle. One beckoned and turned about. Musa followed him into the short passage and up the ladder. As they gained the deck, the small procession turned aft, to face the senior priest.

Dontor stood on the raised after deck, just in front of the helmsman. The wind tugged at his gold and crimson robe, carrying it away from his body, so that it rippled like a flag and exposed bright blue trousers and jacket.

The chief priest of the Bordeklu stood immobile, his arms folded, his feet braced against the sway of his vessel. As the trio below him stopped, he frowned down at them.

"Musa, of Karth," he intoned, "it has been revealed to me that

you have displayed undue curiosity as to the inner mysteries of the worship of the Great God. In your conversations, you have hinted at knowledge forbidden any but the initiated.

"You came to us, a stranger, and we trusted you. But now, we are all faced with the wrath of the Great One as a result of your impieties. A sacrifice, and only a sacrifice, will appease this wrath. Can you name any reason why we should protect you further, at the expense of our own lives? What say you?"

Musa stared up at him. The cotton in his throat had suddenly become thick and bitter—intensely, bitingly bitter. Unsuccessfully, he tried to swallow and wash his voice clear.

A mental flash told him that whatever he said, he was already convicted. Regardless of what defense he might offer, he knew he would be condemned to whatever punishment these people decided to deal out to him. And that punishment, he recognized with horrified clarity, could only be death.

He straightened proudly.

"Oh, priest," he said thickly, "I am guilty of no crime. You are, however, about to commit a serious crime, which is beyond my power to prevent." He paused to regain his voice, then continued.

"Be warned, however, that if there are any real gods above or below, you will receive punishment."

Aware of sudden motion in his direction, he rapidly finished.

"So make whatever sacrifice you wish. You will still have to save your vessel from the natural forces of wind and water."

The priest stiffened angrily.

"Blasphemy!" he said. "Blasphemy of the worst sort." He looked away from Musa.

"I believe that in this case, the Great One will require the ship's company to deal with you in their own way, that they may be purged of any contamination due to your presence." He raised his arms.

"Oh, Great Kondaro, Lord of all the seas, and the things within the seas," he began.

Musa evaded the two slaves with a quick weave of his shoulders.

Covering the distance to the side of the ship with a few quick steps, he jumped over the rail. As he fell, the wind tore at him and his windmilling arms and legs failed to find purchase to right him.

He hit the water with a splash and concussion that nearly knocked the breath from his body, and promptly sank. As the water closed over his head, he struck out with hands and feet in an effort to climb again to light and air. His head broke the surface and he flailed the water in an effort to keep his nose out of the water. The ship was drawing away from him, its storm sails set.

As he struggled in the water, he wondered if it were worth the trouble. After all, he had only to allow himself to sink and all his troubles would be over shortly. Wouldn't it be easier to do this than to continue torturing himself with a hopeless fight?

Too, he wondered if he had been right in leaving the ship. He quickly dismissed that thought. The sea was impersonal, neither cruel nor kind. It was far better, he thought, to be overwhelmed by the impartial forces of nature than to subject himself to the viciousness of an inflamed mob.

17

SUDDENLY, the water was thick, like cold syrup, and Musa found it was taking more and more effort to force his arms to move. Even the air about him resisted any effort he could make. Frantically, he struggled to overcome this new constraint, then he realized that the sea was falling away beneath him. He was trying to swim in air.

He ceased his struggles, looking about. Perhaps, he thought hysterically, there really was a Great One, after all—some irresistible being who would hold trial in his own way.

He looked down, at the sea. It was far below now, the motion of its waves stilled by distance. He shuddered as he realized that this was no dream. Somehow, he was undergoing a real experience outside of all reality.

He was being drawn upward by some force which he could neither see nor—so long as he made no struggle—feel. He drew a convulsive breath as a wave of vertigo dimmed his vision and threw a thick blanket over his consciousness. Determinedly, he threw all the force of his being into the struggle to regain full awareness.

Abruptly, he passed through a zone of complete darkness. Then he found himself in a small, lighted room. The weird constraint vanished.

Two vaguely familiar men stood, facing him. As his mind refocused, Musa recognized the peddler of amulets, then the herder to whom he had once sold a sword. Despite the strangely designed costumes they wore, these two were somehow familiar. He stared at them, searching his elusive memory.

"Well, Musa," said the herder, "I see you got into some trouble."

"Who are you?" demanded Musa. "How do you know so much of my affairs? What . . ."

The peddler of amulets grinned.

"The truth is, we are old companions," he said "Of course, you have long forgotten us, but we never forgot you." He pointed.

"This is Resident Guardsman Lanko. I am Banasel, also of the Stellar Guard. Our job is to prevent just such situations as the one you just found yourself in." His grin faded.

"That, and a few other little things."

"Stellar Guard?" Musa frowned, trying to force his faulty memory to somehow break through and give him the answers he realized must be somewhere in it.

Lanko studied him for a moment, then crossed the small room.

"All of this was explained to you once," he tossed over his shoulder. "But since you rejected the knowledge then, it had to be taken from you. Since you'll be working with us for a while, I think we

will restore your memories. And it begins to look as though we could use some help here. Perhaps you'll want to work with us in the future." He removed equipment from a cabinet.

"Some of this will have to be second hand, since neither Banasel nor I have been in the spots shown. But a lot of it is first hand."

A screen lit up and Musa found himself recalling a campsite near doomed Atakar. As the imposed mental blocks fell away, he looked at Lanko and Banasel, realizing why he had found them disturbingly familiar—why he had been drawn to them in the recent past.

Memories of his days of slavery in Atakar flashed through his mind. He had always remembered the spurt of rage he had felt when he had struck that overseer down with his pry-bar, but now he could clearly remember the man who had seized the fellow's sword, to cut down the two guards before an alarm could be raised. And he remembered the other man, who had somehow led them into the hills, to form a robber band. His previously false memory of two strangely faceless men who had been killed at the gates fell away.

He recalled his days of being the youngest member of the growing band of robbers, and the fateful day when strange visitors had come with strange knowledge and disturbing powers.

Now, he saw the destruction of Atakar as it had actually happened and he learned of the galactic criminals who had depraved that once peaceful farming village, making it the Queen City of the Plain—that great parasite which had for a time dominated the entire Galankar, draining it of its wealth and manpower.

And he shared the experiences of his two older companions during their introduction to the culture of the stars which was called the Galactic Federation. With them, he saw snatches of the training at Aldebaran Base, and he went with them on their training missions.

The power unit shut off and he looked up at his two companions.

"So," Lanko told him, "now you know again."

Musa nodded. "I guess I made a mistake, didn't I?"

"Could be." Banasel reached out to flip a switch.

"Now, let's see what happened on the Bordeklu after you left them. We kept this thing recording. Let's see what kind of a job I can do at live monitoring and editing."

The viewscreen lit again, picking up the action just as Musa twisted away from his guards. Musa watched his own image curiously as Banasel swung away to watch a set of tiny monitor screens. Occasionally, the guardsman flipped switches, shifting the main screen from one pick-up to another.

As Musa disappeared over the vessel's side, the priest, Dontor, lowered his arms. Quickly turning the unscheduled event to advantage, he cried, "We need worry no further, my children. The Great One has called the blasphemer to final account."

He turned to one of his juniors, lowering his voice.

"Go below, Alnar, and break out this man's goods. We must reward those who provided us with this scapegoat."

The junior bowed. "Yes, Sir." He hesitated.

"Will this storm blow over soon?"

Dontor frowned. "I see you didn't pay enough attention to your classes in practical seamanship," he said. He looked at the sky.

"You will find the information as to wind speed and course when we entered this storm," he added. "And in your own scrolls, you should have information on storms of this type. The pilot priest can give you his data, and from this you should be able to closely estimate our time of clearance from this storm." He looked at the junior consideringly.

"I shall expect a report from you before tomorrow's night, giving your estimate of the best course and speeds we should expect for the duration of the storm," he added. Then he smiled.

"However, for now, I can give you a little information. We entered this storm at an edge and we'll never reach the really dangerous core of it, but will pass only through its fringe. Our only problem is to keep from losing a mast during the time we are closest to the storm's heart.' He looked aloft.

"This is a competent crew. They have the sails properly reefed and they can further reef or furl as is necessary. What trouble can we have?"

"Thank you, Sir." The younger priest bowed again. "I will make the necessary arrangements for those goods. And I shall have the report for you before mid morning."

"Very good." Dontor nodded curtly, then turned away and stood, surveying the ship Finally, he walked toward the helm.

"If I ever come into charge of operations," he mused, "I will replace these ignorant steersmen by neophyte priests and let them steer by their own compasses. This method is too cumbersome. Besides, the neophytes should get to sea earlier, anyway."

He approached the pilot priest, who stood apart from the helmsman, his slave holding the little red box with the compass.

"How is our course?"

The priest turned, then bowed. "We are off course twelve degrees to the north, Sir," he reported. "I have instructed the helmsman to come as close to the wind as possible."

Dontor nodded. "Very good. Keep track of your time and we'll correct when we get a chance to shift course to the south. We can determine whatever final correction is needed at noon sight tomorrow."

Alnar came up the ladder to the quarterdeck. Approaching Dontor, he bowed in salute, then reported.

"The goods are ready, Sir."

"Very well. Find those two traders and give them the usual ten percent. Then bring me an inventory."

Musa cast a final, furious glance at the screen, sprang to his feet, and whirled around.

"The usual ten percent, he says! Why, that murdering thief, I'd like to go back down there and get my hands . . ."

Lanko snapped off the switch.

"Don't blame him too much," he laughed. "After all, he's only trying to make a living. And it's the only trade he knows, you see."

As Musa nearly choked on his attempted reply, Banasel broke in.

"Sure," he chuckled. "Besides, it's guys like him that keep guys like us in business."

Lanko saw the horrified expression on Musa's face and quickly sobered. He put his hand on the man's shoulder.

"Look," he explained seriously. "If we got so we took people like these to heart, we'd spend half our time getting psyched to unsnarl our own mental processes." He gestured toward the reels of tape in a cabinet.

"Here, we have the records of dozens of cases similar to this one. Some are worse—some are not so bad. Every one of them had to be —and was—cracked by members of our command. This is just another of those minor, routine incidents that keep cropping up all over the periphery. It's our problem now, and we'll have to go to work on it. But it's still just a problem."

"But they would have killed, simply for their own profit—and in cold blood! And think of all the people . . ."

"I know. I've no doubt but they find a scapegoat for every storm they hit. That, plus the 'usual ten percent,' keeps the faithful even more faithful. But even in that, they do more harm to themselves than to their victims." Lanko smiled compassionately.

"You see, it's far beyond their power to truly destroy an entity—other than their own. Certainly, they can force another to change state—perhaps form. But the being still exists and will merely find another level of existence, where it can continue to learn and grow." He paused thoughtfully.

"You see, there are only a few, rare instances in which a being is truly destroyed. And the means to do this are held only by far more advanced cultures than this. Such means are used only in unusual circumstances. Even accidental destruction is rare, since the necessary combination of circumstances almost never exists. Almost always, the destroyed entity must himself trigger his own destruction." He turned.

"Well, where do you want to start, Banasel?"

"Oh, there's always competition. That's the life of trade—I've been told."

"Later—maybe." Lanko shook his head. "There's an alien or so to be taken care of first, you know."

"I know that. It's fairly obvious by now."

"So, before we do anything else, we've got to find him—or them."

Musa had regained his self control.

"How about these birds in hand?"

"Small fry." Banasel shrugged. "We can take care of them later—if we feel like it." He grinned.

"Of course, it might be fun to give 'em a little nudge toward the eye of that little typhoon. Might find out how they handle themselves in really rough weather. But . . ." He broke off and walked over to the work bench, picking up Lanko's sword.

"I wondered about this thing before," he said. "Now, I'm sure about it. It simply doesn't match a normal technology for any part of this planet at this development stage."

Musa looked at him curiously. "But there are a lot of those around Norlar," he said. "They're still a rarity in the Galankar, to be sure, but . . ."

"That's what he means," Lanko told him. "Too many anachronisms. First, we have this sword. Then, we meet these priests of Kondaro, who discuss meteorology, navigation and pilotage with considerable understanding, and use instruments of pretty advanced design." He frowned.

"And all of this seeming to stem from one area, too." He paused.

"Come to think of it, even those ships seem to be a little advanced in concept. We've had communicators planted on that ship for several days, and there are some details of construction . . . Well, I'm not so sure. But I definitely can't see how or where the technology was developed that allowed the manufacture of those instruments. If it had developed in anything like the normal manner, we'd have picked it up long ago."

Banasel looked up from the sword.

"Yeah, that we would. But in that case, we'd be a few centuries older, too. Hang it, we should have spotted this anyway. I feel like an idiot."

Lanko nodded. "So do I. Anyway, these priests use sextants, watches, compasses. And, just to make things worse, we have one video of a priest laying out a course on an accurate chart. He was using a protractor which was divided into galactic degrees. That was the clincher. Someone's way out of bounds and we've got to find him—or them."

He took the sword from Banasel. "I'd say we'd better go on to the eastern continent and see what's to be found. Then we can figure out how to deal with our friends." He looked thoughtfully around the room.

"But first, Banasel, I'd say it would be a good idea to run out a call to Command and give them the situation. We could run into something a little too hot for us to handle. Be real nice to have Commander A-Ruman and a few other people close by—just in case."

"Going to wait for them before we move in?"

Lanko shook his head. "No," he decided. "I think we've just about had our quota of fool boners, just in the process of letting this thing get this far. I'd like to take a bite out of it before I lie down and let someone else do my job for me."

"True, too." Banasel nodded and turned to the communicator.

Lanko dropped into the pilot seat, glanced at the screens, and moved controls. In the viewscreen, the sea tilted, drew farther away, then became a level, featureless expanse of blue. Far beneath, the tiny dot that was the Bordeklu swept back from them and finally disappeared over the far distant horizon.

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"Well, here's your eastern continent. In fact, this is the city of Kneuros. That's right where you wanted to go, isn't it?"

Musa looked at the viewscreen, then turned to Banasel.

"It's where I thought I wanted to go," he said. "But now, I really know what I wanted in the first place."

"You do?"

"Certainly. I was restless. I thought I liked being a trader in Karth. I roamed around the countryside, thinking I was a free man—able to go and come as I chose. Oh, I was a fairly good trader, but I was just getting things at second hand. Then I heard of the sea. And I thought I'd learn something new. But . . ." He looked at the viewscreen again and sighed.

"I turned down just what I really wanted because it scared me. That was a long time ago, when I was just a silly kid."

Lanko had been watching Musa and listening sympathetically. His attention turned to the viewscreen and he frowned thoughtfully at it, then reached out to adjust the scan controls. He looked more closely, then turned.

"That isn't the Kneuros it should be," he said decidedly. "It's a totally different city." He stabbed a finger out toward the screen.

Banasel's attention followed the pointing finger.

"It has grown up a lot," he said, "but that might be just due to a big increase in trade due to the ships from Norlar—and maybe other places, too. After all, this is the main shipping center, from what Musa's been telling us."

Lanko looked at him impatiently.

"And what kind of culture did they have here in Knoatakia when the survey check was made?"

Banasel spread his hands. "Oh, hunting and gathering out on the prairie. A little herding, here and there. Fishing, of course, and a little settled agriculture. Why?"

"How about manufacture?"

Banasel shook his head. "Handcraft. Pottery, at some of the clay outcrops. Might be a little catalan forge here or there, and maybe a bronze smelter or two. Nothing very elaborate."

"All right. Now take a good look right there. What kind of furnaces would you say those were? And what do you think you'd find inside those big buildings with the chimneys?" Lanko's hand darted across the screen.

Banasel looked more closely, then turned.

"Only one answer to all this." His voice was coldly expressionless. "We've got a plague of drones. Wonder how long they've been here."

Lanko shrugged. "Takes more than a few weeks to set up stuff like this," he said. "Pretty advanced industry, if you ask me." He sighed.

"The Commander's going to have us by the hair for this one. We shouldn't have spent so much time on the wrong side of the ocean."

Banasel looked at the screen angrily.

"Wonder how they sneaked in without tripping one of the alarms."

"We'll have to ask them that. Let's get on with it and find 'em—quick."

Musa looked at his companions curiously, then gestured toward the screen.

"From what you've told me," he said quietly, "something like this should take hundreds of years to develop. How could anyone educate people to do these things in anything less?"

"It's easy," said Banasel, "if you don't give a hang about the people involved. You don't educate them. You just give 'em a set of definite instructions.

" 'Put a brick here. Use two grams of material there. Assemble the pieces according to this picture.' See?" he waved a hand.

"They don't have to know what they're doing. They just do it. If some guy deviates from the instructions, you really give him a going over. If he lives through it, he'll have enough sense not to be getting any more original ideas." He turned away from the screen disgustedly.

Musa shook his head. "I think I see what you mean. Pretty hard on the people concerned."

Banasel glanced back at him.

"That doesn't make much difference to a drone," he said coldly. "If he had any respect for the rest of the cosmos, he wouldn't be a drone."

"I suppose you're right." Musa laughed uneasily. "How do you plan to find these drones?"

"Search pattern." Lanko shrugged. "We'll cruise around in a grid pattern until we pick up some sort of reading on the detectors." He pointed at a bank of instruments.

"They're bound to have a ship somewhere and we'll pick up a small amount of power radiation—from their screens, if they have them up, otherwise from their power units. Even in full phaseout, there's a little radiation that can be picked up from close enough." He smiled.

"If they had a ship orbiting in space, one of the alarms would have picked it up long ago, so we have to assume it's grounded. They must have come in for direct planetfall—maybe during a meteor shower—and operated practically on the deck ever since they got here." He sighed.

"We'd better go right into a pattern. We'll use Kneuros as origin and plot from here. Pick up anachronisms with the cameras as we go. All those things'll have to be cleared up later, anyway." He stared at the detectors.

"Let's see. If I wanted to hide a ship, I'd use the most inaccessible location I could find. We do that ourselves, in fact. And there are some mountain ranges inland."

"That's right," Banasel added. "And if I wanted to hide out, I'd worry about ground approach a lot more than air detection—at least on this planet."

The ship gained altitude, accelerated, and sped eastward.

Day by day, the course trace built up, the cameras recording the terrain under the ship and the two guardsmen building up their mosaic. The ship cruised in carefully plotted arcs, mapping as it went.

From time to time, Lanko made comparison of the new mosaic with an earlier survey, noting the differences. There were new settlements. Where a nomadic culture had roamed the prairie, industrial civilization was building and expanding.

The search pattern expanded, to approach the high, central mountains. Slowly, the ship cruised over high peaks and through wooded valleys.

A needle flickered, rose from zero, then steadied.

Somewhere, back of the instrument panel, a tiny current actuated a micro relay. An alarm drop fell.

As the warning buzz sounded, both Lanko and Banasel looked over at the detector panel.

"Well, it's about time." Lanko leaned to his right, setting dials. A screen lit up and he looked at it in surprise.

It showed a shaky, red line which stretched across the ridge line of the mountain range. He checked the dials carefully, then adjusted one of them.

The line spread out, to form a curtain-like figure. Behind it could be seen the outlines of the mountains on the other side of the divide Lanko shook his head.

"That's no ship screen," he said. "Looks more like a barrier of some sort Seems to completely cut off passage from here to the other side of this divide."

Banasel looked at the screen, then turned, to pull tapes from the storage cabinet.

"This whole pattern begins to look familiar somehow," he growled. "I seem to remember something about 'development.' "

Lanko held up a hand.

"That did it," he said. "Couple of guys in my section back at training used to spend hours over a playing sphere. They called the game 'Power Development.' They had a couple of random selectors that knocked out situations for them as they went along." He frowned.

"The object of the game was to build up a culture that was stronger and more durable than your opponent's culture—anyway, stronger." He looked thoughtfully at the red figure on the screen.

"Come to think of it, the rules forbade the two growing cultures from having direct contact. When they met, it had to be on previously neutral ground. So their boundary was split by a barrier." He got to his feet.

"Look, suppose we run a check on this thing we've got here. Let's just see what it does for a living."

Banasel looked at the screen.

"That's my department."

He opened a cabinet and took out instruments. One by one, he tied meters and scopes into the detector test points, taking readings and punching them into a computer. Finally, he poked the activator bar and watched as the machine spat out tape.

Above the tape chute, a series of graphs indicated the computations. Banasel ignored them, feeding the tape into another machine.

"I know there are some characters who can make a positive identification from the figures and curves. But I'm just a beginner. That's why they have directories, I guess."

Lanko smiled. "I don't know anything, either," he agreed. But I can generally figure out some place to go and look up what I need."

They watched the directory as its screens glowed. Figures and descriptions shimmered and there was a rapid ticking. A sheet flowed out toward them and Banasel tore it off as the ticks ceased.

"Hah," he grunted. "All that fuss for something as simple as that?" He held the sheet out to Lanko.

"Minimum power life shield," he said. "Nothing else to it. You can toss rocks through it—talk through it—even take a running jump, and go through it yourself. Only one trouble, you wouldn't be alive when you got to the other side. It won't slow down a thing, but it's a pretty real barrier, all right."

"Can we neutralize it?"

"Sure." Banasel shrugged. "With the equipment we've got, it won't even make us raise a sweat. But it'll be a lot of generations before anything's developed here that'll put it out of action." He started to put his equipment away.

"The eastern half of this continent is separated completely from the western half for all practical purposes." He grinned. "Of course, they could stand back and insult each other. Even shoot arrows and throw things. But the only way they can really come into contact with each other is by crossing the Soruna Kran."

"Yeah." Lanko nodded ruefully. "They probably avoid this whole area by now. We'll probably find a taboo hung on the mountains half way down to the foothills. And we thought we were doing all right. Had the Galankar all pacified. Doing pretty well over in the Plains, too." He flicked a finger at the image of the barrier.

"How's this animal generated? Take one generator, or do you use a whole string?"

'Relay system," Banasel told him. "Main generator plus a flock of amplifiers. Easy to build, I'd say You could get the pieces from any good spare parts kit and any school kid could put it together. Then, he could park 'em on the right peaks and a few of the things could block off a lot of kilometers." He went to the detector, adjusted the dials, and waited.

The curtain weaved across the screen. A bright point appeared and crawled to center screen. Banasel turned a dial and the point stopped.

"There's one of the relays," he announced. "Right on that peak to the south. Want to shut it down?"

Lanko nodded. "That's a good way to get the direction to the

primary," he said. "Suppose you damp this thing, then we'll go after the main generator."

"Sounds good. How about running up close."

As the flier came close to the peak, Banasel examined his readings on the weapons panel, then held a button down. A faint haze appeared about the rocky peak, glowed, then faded. In the detector screen the red curtain to the south was abruptly gone. Lanko nodded and turned the director wheel.

"Good enough," he said. "We go north. I'll run the line while you track down that primary."

The flier skipped from peak to peak of the long range of mountains. Suddenly, Banasel held up a hand.

"Hold it. There the thing is. See that flare?"

Lanko glanced toward the screen, then depressed his control. The flier raced toward a high crag.

Wedged into the rocks at the tip of the crag was a small, weatherproof box. Before it was a tiny level space, too small for any ship to land. Behind it was sheer cliff, which dropped off to overlook a valley hundreds of meters below. Lanko inspected the screen.

"Inhospitable character, isn't he? He could have at least had enough front yard for a guy to set down." He looked around, then flipped at his belt control and dropped through the exit port, easing himself to the level of the box. He remained a respectful distance from it.

"Pick up anything other than the barrier?"

"No," his communicator told him, "not a thing. Generator is inside its own radiation, though. You'll have to go in with shields up. Or do you want me to damp the little brute from here?"

Lanko grinned. "I'm a coward," he said. "Suppose we do both."

He touched his control belt and floated toward the generator. About the box, a faint haze appeared. It glowed and subsided.

"She's dead. Go on in."

Lanko dropped lightly beside the box. He leaned over, examining it, then unsnapped a catch. For a few minutes, he examined

the inside circuitry, then he shrugged and reached in, tearing loose a circuit cube. He looked at his handiwork for an instant, then pulled his hand weapon from his belt, adjusting it. Finally, he stood over the box, directing the weapon at its contents.

A red glow appeared. It brightened, to become blindingly white. Trickles of glowing liquid flowed over the rocks.

Lanko released his pressure on the trigger.

"It'll take quite some fixing to get that thing going again," he remarked. Again, he turned toward the flier.

"Haul out, Banasel," he ordered. "I'm going to wait around here for a while. I'd like to see what kind of a little beastie comes crawling around these rocks."

He floated over to another crag and settled himself in the concealment of a pile of rocks.

The day wore on. From time to time, Lanko shifted his position, maintaining his watch on his surroundings and on the ruined generator on the other crag. Slowly, the sun crept across the sky. Disgustedly, Lanko started to pull his communicator from his belt.

"Better call Banasel in," he growled to himself. "Means we'll have to pull back and keep close surveillance from the ship. This idiot doesn't keep good track of his equipment."

He paused, looking over at the crag. A figure was floating down to it. Lanko eased his projector from his belt, lined the sights up, and waited. The figure floated down and settled to the rocks. Lanko put pressure on his trigger and the figure was suddenly clothed in a blaze of brilliant light. The screens flared ever brighter, then blacked out. The figure collapsed to the rocks.

Lanko floated over to examine his prisoner.

He was humanoid. There were some differences from the usual type encountered on the planet, but they were not too extreme. Some might even be attracted by his faintly unusual appearance and none would realize that here was a complete alien.

The guardsman shrugged and reached down to strip the fellow's belt from him, then pulled him into a more secure position on the top of the crag.

He took his time, making a complete search of the captive's clothing and removing equipment and weapons. At last, he drew back, satisfied that the man was harmless. He unhooked his communicator.

"Oh, there's one more thing," he told himself. "Why take fool chances?"

He put the communicator back and pulled a fine chain from a case at his belt, then walked back to the inert figure. He raised the man's head from the rock and slipped the delicate looking necklace about his neck, then squeezed the pendant and stepped back, nodding.

"That'll do it," he said aloud. Again, he unhooked the communicator.

"Come on in, Banasel," he ordered. "I've got something here."

He settled back, leaning against a rock.

As the paralysis effect wore off, the man lying on the ground flexed his muscles, then got to his feet. Lanko watched him, his weapon nested on his knees. As the man tensed to spring, Lanko raised the weapon warningly.

"You are Genro Kir?"

"Who are you? What's the idea of this?" Kir reached for his belt, then dropped his hand again as he found nothing there.

"Resident Guardsman. Name's Lanko. You seem to be a little out of place on this planet."

"I'm not responsible to some native patrolman." Kir's face became stubborn. "I'm a Galactic Citizen."

"Possibly. We'll leave that to higher authority." Lanko shrugged, his face expressionless.

"In the meantime, you'll have to accept things as they are. Or would you prefer to be paralyzed again?"

Genro Kir tensed, making an obvious mental effort. Lanko grinned at him in real amusement.

"I took that, too. Wouldn't do you much good anyway. They gave me a heavy duty model, you know. It's a little heavy, but even a senior citizen would find it hard to beat through the shield and

get at my nerve centers that way." He waved toward a rock with his weapon.

"Might as well sit down and talk about it. This barrier makes things pretty obvious, of course."

Kir looked around unhappily, then eased to the ground.

"What's to talk about, then? You know what we were doing."

"We've a good idea. It might be nice to know where the others in this little game are. Like to know how many of them there are, too."

"What would you expect? There are two of them, of course. But I don't know where they are myself. They're building up their forces, working for position and resources. This is just the opening. The real game won't start for a long time yet."

Lanko laughed shortly. "I don't think it will ever start. But it would make it simpler for all concerned if you'd help us find the players."

"I told you. I don't know where they are. They don't have to tell the referee every move they make, unless they want a ruling—or a consultation on legality. I was just keeping watch on the general picture, to see that neither of them broke a rule or took unfair advantage. And, too, I was maintaining the barrier."

"I noticed that." Lanko nodded expressionlessly. "You may not know where they are, but you can certainly contact them." He waved his hand weapon indifferently.

"They'll be hunted down, you know. It'll be a lot easier for everyone if you cooperate."

"Cooperate with a bunch of half savage natives? Work with primitives against my own friends? Don't be more stupid than you have to be!"

"I see." Lanko glanced away. "An ethical code of your own, of course. Well, in that case, we'll have to go to work."

He glanced down at the weapon in his hand.

"Oh, yes," he added. "I really don't need this. Just didn't want you to hurt yourself." He pointed.

"You notice that little ornament you're wearing? The medallion there, I mean."

Genro Kir looked down at his chest. "What . . . ?"

"I thought you might be unfamiliar with the device," Lanko told him. "I'd better explain it to you. It's a type ninety-two gravitic manacle and it's designed to hold any known being. You can move about freely, so long as you don't make a sudden or violent motion. The device is keyed to my shield and you'll suffer temporary paralysis if you get within my near zone. A couple of meters are safe enough." He walked over to the burned out barrier generator.

"Oh, yes," he added. "Don't try to take it off. It's designed to prevent that action by positive means. It won't do you any permanent damage but it can make you pretty uncomfortable. If it becomes necessary, I can activate the manacle. It'll put you into full paralysis and send out a strong homing signal."

Genro Kir looked at him sourly. "I won't try to escape," he grumbled. "You don't need to make a lot of threats."

"It's immaterial to me whether or not you try to escape." Lanko glanced at the surrounding hills. "I was merely describing the capabilities of the manacle." He stretched.

"Well, here comes our flier. Want to guide us in to your ship? Be a lot easier on the finish if we go in with the combination, you know."

"Suppose I refuse to tell you?"

The guard flier swung close. Lanko herded his prisoner through the hatch, being careful not to get too close to him.

"Oh, we can find your ship," he said finally. "We'll just keep on our pattern. Eventually, we'll find the screen flare, then we'll go in with a can opener. Might be able to salvage the thing without burning the generators out, but we won't promise anything."

Genro Kir sighed resignedly. "All right. I'll give you the settings. The ship's just across the ridge, over in the next valley."

Lanko nodded. "Good enough," he said. "I'll pick it up and bring it to rendezvous." He turned to Banasel.

"Run me over there and drop me off. Soon's I get that ship in the air, go ahead back to the islands. I'll nose around here some more, then come out and meet you."

19

LANKO WALKED OVER toward the grounded sportster, looking at it curiously.

"So that's an Iatorian Custom ninety-seven," he said. "Never saw anything like that before, but I'm sure of one thing. Someone put up a lot of credits for that thing." He frowned.

"Come to think of it, I wonder if this thing really belongs to this guy. Better check the registry when I get inside."

He moved forward cautiously, his screen at full power. Although Genro Kir had given him a combination, he had no particular desire to run into a booby trap.

At last, he stood before the entry port. He reached up, testing the latch. It refused to give way. He shook his head disgustedly and checked his shield settings. They were right—according to the combination he had been given. He shrugged and unhooked his communicator.

"This thing won't open," he said. "What's wrong with the combination?"

There was a pause. Then he heard Genro Kir's voice.

"I forgot to tell you, Guardsman," the drone said. "It's keyed to personal aura. You'll have to let me come down there and open it for you."

Lanko smiled. He could remember several classes on the dangers of personally keyed ships. Slowly, he backed away from the port, moving back until he could seek the shelter of a cluster of rocks.

"Screens down, Banasel," he ordered.

A faint haze grew about the sportster. At first, it was a barely perceptible fluorescence. Then it became a fiercely incandescent glow. It flamed for a few seconds, then faded, becoming green, yellow, red, and at last, blinking to invisibility.

"They're damped," Banasel's voice announced. "Shall I wind this thing up some more and knock out the generators?"

"Not necessary," Lanko told him. "Just hold her in stasis. I'll cut the power when I get in."

He rose from his position behind the rocks, idly kicking at the face of the largest one as he walked past. A shower of dust crumbled to the ground.

"Good thing there aren't any trees growing around here," he said. "We'd have a forest fire to put out."

He pulled his hand weapon from his belt, made an adjustment, then walked over to the ship. After an examination of the lock, he directed the weapon toward a spot on the hull.

"Still a lot of credits in this thing," he commented laconically. "Shame to hurt the finish too much."

A few seconds later, he stepped back, examining his work. Then he nodded in satisfaction and removed another instrument from his tool belt. He focused it on the ship's port, flicked a switch, then waited.

For a few seconds, nothing happened, then there was a grinding screech of tortured metal. The port swung open.

As Lanko stepped inside, he inspected the control room carefully. At last, satisfied that no booby traps were set, he crossed to the control panel. He located the power switches and cut them off, then picked his microphone from his belt.

"All's well, Banasel," he reported. "Ease off."

He watched the indicators as the damping field was eased off. When the needles were at normal readings, he flicked the panel switches to neutral and turned the main power back on. At last, he picked up his microphone again.

"Haul out, Banasel," he ordered. "I'll burn down the rest of

this guy's carrier relays, then nose around on the other side for a while. Meet you back at the archipelago."

He went back to the port and tack welded it shut with his hand weapon. Then he started checking the ship's lockers.

The galley, he found, was well stocked. He looked over the wide selection, smiling to himself.

"Afraid he's going to miss this sort of thing for a while," he said. He closed the lockers again and turned his attention to the lockers in the lounge.

Quickly, he checked the various personal articles, then he turned his attention to the tape shelves.

Genro Kir, he discovered, was an enthusiastic chronicler and his tape shelves contained a chronological record of virtually every incident that had occurred on the sportster for several years. Lanko picked out a few tapes and ran short sequences, then he shrugged and packed the entire collection into a large carrying case.

"Evaluation people can use almost all of this, I suppose," he told himself. "And we may find something here that'll be some use right now." He went back to the controls.

For a few minutes, he studied the panel, then he touched a few switches.

"Simple," he told himself. "This thing operates itself."

The ship rose and arrowed toward the line of barrier generators. Lanko watched the detector, pausing over each of the relay amplifiers long enough to direct a flaming beam of energy at it. At last, he pulled the ship around and retraced the barrier line, making sure that no trace of the equipment remained, either to amplify some random pulse or to provide a puzzle for some future archaeologist.

He allowed the ship to cruise slowly eastward, watching the cities as they drifted beneath him. They were, he noted, somewhat less forced in their development than the cities of the west. Finally, as the sun started to sink beneath the horizon again, he turned the sportster and set his course for the west and the great sea.

On his way over the sea, Lanko noted the positions of a few of

the trading ships, approaching some of them closely to check them. As he neared a small archipelago, his communicator screen brightened.

"Resident Guardsman to Sportster. Identify yourself. Over."

Lanko picked up his microphone. "It's all right, Banasel. Got a fairly good look over east. No trace of the players, though."

"Well, we can't have everything. Come on in. I've got a beam on you."

Lanko checked the approach scope. The small circle was a trifle out of center. He touched the control bar and as the circle centered, he snapped a switch and sat back.

The sportster dipped over an island, crossed a narrow lagoon, and settled to the ground beside the guard flier. Lanko started pulling tools from his kit. Working carefully, he removed the cover from the control console, examined the terminal blocks, then attached a small cylinder between two terminals.

He closed the console again and walked over to the exit port, where he pressed the emergency release. The blow-out port puffed away from the ship and dropped to the ground. For an instant, the control console was blurred, its outlines wavering as though seen through wavy glass. Lanko waited till the distortion cleared away, then walked back to the pilot's chair. He set the drive for a slow climb and snapped the drive switch on. Nothing happened. He pushed the emergency power button. There was no result. Slowly, he increased the drive till it was at maximum. All meters remained at zero. He nodded, picked up the tape case, and went out the gaping port.

The port of the flier opened and Banasel looked out.

"Need any help?"

"No. This is one ship that won't fly till someone from Center comes out to pull the block and realign the console." Lanko crossed the sand and entered the flier.

Banasel looked at the case interestedly. "Looks heavy. Got anything more on our friend here?"

Lanko smiled and held up the tape case.

"Just about his life history," he said. He set the case on deck and leaned over, opening it.

"I sampled some of these," he remarked, "but I didn't run any of them clear through. Like to run this one. It shows their original arrival here—I hope."

He picked out a cassette, threading it into the playback. Then he flipped a switch on and perched on the workbench, watching. The viewscreen lit.

There were three of them in the control room. Genro Kir sat at the computer console. He watched idly as the tape came out, then turned.

"Says we're way out. Don't suppose anybody's been this far before."

The man who slouched in the cushioned observer's seat looked at him scornfully.

"Sharp boy," he applauded sarcastically. "So where'd you point this can in the first place? Aldebaran, maybe?"

Kir shrugged. "Always got to make a wise crack, don't you, Sira Nal? How would I know where I punched? That lousy scout got on us, I just poked a handful of buttons and slammed the bar. Maybe I ought to go back and hunt him up, he could pilot us in?"

"Oh, sure. So all right. So you got away from him. That's the first guardsman we've left this trip?" Sira Nal pointed at the viewscreen.

"So you got a name for this system?"

Again, Kir shrugged. "What's the difference? We're here, aren't we? Maybe I'll check it out some time."

The third man tensed. He looked across the control room anxiously, then came out of his chair.

"You mean we're lost?"

"Sure." Genro Kir looked at him disgustedly. "Sure, we're lost—far's that stupid guardsman's concerned." He glanced back at his controls.

"Whoever heard of some guy with an index and a safety limiter getting so far out, he's noplace."

The other smiled uneasily. "But I thought you said . . ."

Sira Nal waved impatiently. "Said he ain't checked yet. What's the matter with you? You talk like some stupid primitive." He turned toward Genro Kir.

"So take a reading. Our boy, Buron Koree's got the worries. Besides, it might be nice to know, we got a system loaded with guardsmen and things, or do we get someplace we can make a 'fall and look around?"

Genro Kir didn't bother to answer. His hands touched buttons on the console and the computer pilot glowed. He waited while the few stars in the viewscreen spun and danced madly then froze in their original places, then he touched a few more switch tabs and rapped the side of his hand against an actuator bar.

He examined the small computer viewscreen for a few seconds before he turned back to his companions.

"Got no record on this place," he said. "Could be, it's been checked in the last few cycles, since this thing's been serviced, but far's this can's got it, she's a new system. No guards or anything."

Buron was still uneasy. "But where are we?"

Sira Nal looked at him disgustedly. "What did we drag you along on this trip for, anyway?" he asked. "You've heard of the galaxy, maybe?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. But . . ."

"We're still in it."

Genro Kir was still punching buttons. Again, he punched the actuator.

"Might's well take a look," he remarked. "Now, I'm curious." He glanced toward Buron Koree, who was looking at the viewscreen anxiously.

"We skipped over to Sector Seven," he said. "Ended out someplace in the unexplored area near periphery." He grinned.

"Safety limiter wouldn't let us get out into the intergalactic volume, any more'n it'd let us end up too close to some sun."

He patted the console before him.

"Anyway, don't worry about it. We can find our way back quick enough. When we feel like it, we'll just slap Lura here on 'homing' and she'll head right back to school, see?"

Sira Nal yawned. "Yeah. Only maybe we don't want to go back for a while. Maybe we'd sort of like to take a nice, long vacation. How about that?"

"I don't know." Buron was unconvinced. "But how long before they start wondering about us? And what if that guard scout gets us traced?"

"Asked for ident, didn't he?" Sira Nal snorted impatiently. "Meant he didn't manage to pick up our registry. So you didn't hear Genro give him any answers, did you? Lots of sportsters in space. How's he to know which one he was fooling with?"

"Yeah, that's true, but . . . well, I don't see why we don't just go back and forget the whole trip. They've got us way off course now."

"So we forget about the hunting trip. What of it?" Sira Nal grinned coldly. "Maybe we'll find something here's going to be more fun." Again, he swung toward Genro Kir.

"Let's go in and take a real close look. This might be lots better than some supervised hunt on Pronul."

The sportster flicked into motion, closing in on the star and its planets. Detectors fanned out, focused on various planets, one by one, and presented them on the viewscreen for study. Finally, Sira Nal looked away from the glowing screen.

"You know, this one looks interesting," he said. "Look how this planet's laid out, will you? Like a power development gamesphere, see? There's two major continental masses. Wide oceans, natural barriers. Everything you need for a game of power. Only thing we need is the chance wheel and the resource selectors." He looked again at the viewscreen, nodding to himself.

"And there are real resources there, and plenty of dumb primitives to work on developing 'em, I'll bet. They'd give us all kinds of

chance figures—even some wild twists, maybe. Make a real, interesting game. How about that?"

Genro Kir looked around. "Aw, so who cares about sitting around some idiot ball, playing power development. That's for the bulge brains, like Buron, here. Maybe he likes that sort of thing, but me, I want action."

Sira Nal laughed. "So, it's a planet, ain't it? So they got animals. You can go hunting. In your spare time, maybe you can watch us —make noises like a referee, or something. Maybe you'll learn something." He looked over at Buron Koree.

"You're always showing off on power," he went on. "Real good with the chance wheel and resource selector. Only those are just canned situations. Bet I can make a monkey out of you with real stuff."

Buron Koree looked at him in annoyance. "It's a matter of knowing the principles of historical synthesis and applying them," he said. "A good player would do even better with a real culture than he does with the selectors."

"Think so?" Sira Nal sneered faintly. "I've got an idea that stuff's all a lot of stupid theory the profs dream up to make 'em look good. Tell you what I'll do. You know all about this historical synthesis. Me, I know something about pushing people around. I'll make you a little bet I can beat you down there on that planet. We'll both pick half of that big continent there and I'll bet you I can overrun the other continent before you get your culture off to a good start."

Buron smiled. "Don't be silly," he said. "If you're lucky, you'll meet me about the time you land on the second continent. And it'll take me two or three moves to push you right back to the barrier."

Genro Kir looked at them. "He's probably right, Sira Nal," he said. "You know how he moves things around when he gets everything started. Even a string of bum selections from the wheel seems to work out when he's playing through it."

Sira Nal shook his head. "That's when he has pieces for mov-

ing," he said, "and rules out of some prof's book to go by. Give him a bunch of real people to handle—even if they are just a dumb crowd of primitives, and I'll bet he won't do so well. I'll be chasing him all over his own back yard before he gets across the first ocean."

Buron looked at the viewscreen, then turned a dial, bringing the larger continent to center screen and enlarging it. He studied the terrain features.

"There's a natural barrier here. Chain of mountains just about the middle of this land mass," he said. "We could set up a force barrier there and have a real separator, so our cultures couldn't mix. That would force them across the oceans for expansion." He smiled.

"You know, Sira Nal, it is just like a game ball. Tell you what. I'll play you one game. Standard tournament rules." He stopped, looking thoughtful.

"Only one trouble," he added. "This'll take quite a while. How about the school authorities? They'll wonder what happened to us."

"Oh, we'll let Genro Kir figure out something on that," said Sira Nal easily. "Like I said, he can referee. Maybe he can take a break sometime. Go back and tell 'em something about we've decided to do some research or something." He laughed.

"Yeah, that's it, research. Just what we're doing. Free citizen can take a period or so off if he feels like it, can't he? How about it, Genro?"

Genro Kir touched switches on his control console.

"Yeah," he said. "They can expect us when they see us. After all, none of us made any new course commitments. So, maybe we decided to join the Spacers for a while."

20

LANKO SNAPPED the viewscreen off and slid from the workbench.

"Well, they went on from there," he said. "Obviously, they failed to note any evidence of our presence. And somehow, they managed to blunder in without our spotting them—for which we should hang our heads." He grinned ruefully.

"We'll probably get 'em hung for us when Commander A Riman gets the reports." He paused.

"When this thing is wrapped up, I want to go out and give those orbiting monitors a real going over," he added. "Something's wrong out there."

"I don't know." Banasel shook his head. "There was a lot of odd clutter in the viewscreen in that recording. Maybe they came in about the time we lost those three monitors. Remember that?"

"Yeah. Come to think of it, it was about that time. Bum excuse. Anyway, they got in and checked the planet. Sira Nal pulled the west. Buron Koree got the east. Genro Kir set up the barrier and they started messing up a whole continent with Genro Kir keeping an eye on their progress to make sure they didn't try to mess each other up as well."

Banasel nodded. "Atmosphere of perfect mutual trust, I see."

"Oh, definitely. Honorable men, these."

"But where do the Kondaran priests come in?"

"Oh, Sira Nal's getting off to an early start. He wanted to set up a transport force so he could move plenty of strength into the Plains of Jogurth when he was ready. So, he started a big shipbuilding industry in and around Kneuros." Lanko smiled.

"Then, he had to have some place for the ships to go. So he

worked out this system to develop a trans-oceanic trade. Gives him a double twist. He's got his ships, he's got a good beachhead, and he's got some dominance all set up on the Continent. If you take a good look, you'll find that most of the priests and nearly all the neophytes are Knoatakian. He won't have too much trouble when he decides to move in—not around his beachheads, at least."

"This is legitimate, according to their rules, I suppose?"

"Seems that way. According to Kir's tapes, he thinks it's a clever gag. 'Sound move' is the way he expressed it." Lanko leaned over and pulled the tape reel from the playback.

"I got that much from high-spotting the tapes. How much more has Genro Kir told you?"

"As little as possible."

Lanko looked toward the prisoner who sat in a small alcove behind a force barrier.

"Why not cooperate? You're due for Aldebaran anyway. A little help now would make it easier for you and your partners later on."

Genro Kir's lip curled. "I told you before, I don't have to lower myself to work with a bunch of low-grade primitives." He paused.

"And I think my father will have a lot to say about your wanton destruction and pillage in my ship. He has a lot of influence."

"Pillage?"

"That's right." Kir seemed to swell a little. "You must have violated personal seals to get at those tapes. And you wantonly tore open the door of an expensive ship after I had offered to open it for you." He sneered.

"You know, after Father gets through with that, I don't think I'll be in any trouble. But tell me, what do they do to you savages when you get into trouble with important people?"

Lanko cradled his chin in one hand.

"Your father is a very important person, then?"

"That's right. He might even be sent to the Council in a few cycles."

"I see." Lanko nodded thoughtfully. "You know, I've always wondered how this influence works. But . . . well, I seem to re-

member, there was something in one of my training courses about parental responsibility in certain cases. Seems to me I remember an example. Referred to a senior official who was dismissed over some . . . Well, anyway." He turned to Banasel.

"You know, I think our friend here has really helped us quite a bit, at that. His detailed recording of that 'sound move' should net us one of the players in a hurry."

"Oh?"

"Sure. Sira Nal's spent a lot of time building a situation up for himself. Now, what's the whole foundation of this cult of Kondaro?"

"Why, they navigate ships. They keep strict security on their methods, and they enforce that security by terrorism." Banasel paused.

"They claim that no one else can successfully cross the Great Sea, and it seems to be a proven fact that they're right. So, they collect from seamen, traders, and shipowners." He smiled.

"Come to think of it, I guess they really own the ships, too. The so-called owners just think they've got some property."

"That's about right. And they claim that only they can overcome the spells and actions of the 'sea demons,' an ugly crew of flying things who amuse themselves by trying to destroy any ship they come across." Lanko held up a finger.

"But first—and most important—they navigate ships. They guarantee to get 'em across and back. Right?"

Banasel nodded and Lanko held his other hand up.

"Then what would happen if they should start losing ships? Suppose that from now on, no ship returns to port?"

Banasel watched him as he walked over to the control console.

"Hey, wait a minute. I know these priests are a bunch of pirates —or at any rate, some of them are. But there are the crews, and a lot of traders are involved. We can't . . ."

"Who said anything about destroying life?" Lanko turned back. "We have here a fairly nice group of islands. Oh, they're not too spacious, and there are no luxurious cities, of course. But there's

water. And there's plenty of food. Fresh fruit can be picked with no trouble, and the fish practically jump out of the water." He smiled.

"In fact, all these islands lack is a group of colonists." He turned back to the console.

"The ships are provisioned fairly well, but they generally put in here for those very fruits and water. So all we need do is give a little unwanted help."

"Shipwreck on the islands?"

"You might call it that."

Banasel shook his head doubtfully. "It'll take a long time to undermine their reputation that way," he objected. "And we'll have a lot of people on these islands before we get through."

"I don't think so. Kondaro's a god, remember? And gods are infallible. Sira Nal can explain a few disappearances by accusations of irreverence, but he'll know better than to try explaining too many that way. I should imagine that his normal losses due to unexpected storms and one thing or another just about use up his allotment along that line." Lanko shook his head.

"No, Sira Nal's going to be really sensitive about losses. He'll have to work fast to prevent any rumor to the effect that the sea god is losing his grip, or he may lose his whole grip on Norlar." He paused.

"And what ship do you think I spotted standing this way?"

"Oh, no! That's too much of a coincidence."

"Not at all. We took quite a while gathering in our boy here." Lanko inclined his head toward Genro Kir. "And the Bordeklu's home port is Tanagor, so Musa's old ship wouldn't spend too much layover time in Kneuros. I'd say they were just about on schedule." He glanced at Musa.

"You'd like to see your old friend, Dontor, wouldn't you? Like to see how he works his way out of a real emergency?"

Musa grinned wolfishly.

"It might be fun, at that." He looked toward the viewscreen.

Lanko reached out and twisted the dials.

"Get your communicators hot, Banasel," he said. "The little jobbies on the ship should still be good. I'll get your settings for you."

He watched as the view shifted, moving the dials slowly. At last, the great, red ship was in sight. He turned the field to get a close view. Banasel looked over his shoulder at the settings, then turned to his own console. One by one, the monitors came to life.

Dontor strode firmly toward the ladder leading to the observation deck, his figure growing as he approached one of the communicators. As he reached the foot of the ladder, he paused. The slaves had rigged the screen and the priest looked proudly about this ship of which he was the actual and absolute master. Slowly, in majestic silence, he mounted the ladder and passed through the opening in the curtain.

He went to the middle of the forecastle and stopped, waiting until the two junior priests had taken their positions near him and the slaves had set down the equipment chests. The slaves straightened and stood, arms folded, waiting for orders. Dontor inspected the area, then moved his head imperiously.

"Very good," he said. "Take your posts."

As the slaves left, the three priests opened their instrument chests, removing their navigational tools. Alnar went to the folding table, spread a chart over it, then took his watch from his chest and stood back, holding it.

"Just about time, Sir."

"Very well." Dontor glanced at the juniors, saw that Kuero had his sextant ready, and raised his own.

"Now," he instructed when the readings had been taken, "you will each calculate our position independently, using Kuero's altitude. I'll check your operations when you have finished."

He replaced his sextant in its case, then headed the small procession back to the cabins.

The ship's routine continued its uneventful course. The junior priests reported to Dontor with their calculations. Their work was

examined, criticized, and finally approved. They were given further instructions. All was well aboard the Bordeklu.

The chief priest examined the charts and decided on the course for the next watch. The ship, he thought, would do well to put in for water. And some of the island fruits would go well on the table. He set a course accordingly and went topside to give instructions to the pilot.

Banasel turned away from his monitors.

"Are you going to help them on their way?"

"There's no need yet. They'll have plenty of worries when they try to anchor. Let 'em have peace of mind right now."

Ahead of the ship, the sea was calm. No cloud marred the bright blue overhead. Slowly, a vague shape formed on the horizon. Gradually it grew, to reveal itself as a small, wooded island.

The ship continued on its course, approaching the bit of land. As it approached the breaker line, orders sounded sharply and the sails collapsed, spilling their wind. A crew forward cut the snubbing line and the bow anchor splashed into the water.

The ship continued on its way. The anchor cable became taut. In defiance of the helmsman's efforts, the ship continued on a straight line. The bow cable stretched, then loosened a little as the anchor dragged. Still, the ship refused to swing. Hurriedly, the crew aft dropped the stern anchor.

The ship persisted on its course toward the sandy beach.

All hands forward took shelter as the bow cable snapped and whipped viciously across the deck.

The ship continued its slow progress.

Frantically, the crew backed the sails, hoisting them to take all the wind possible The helmsman spun the wheel in a final effort to turn the ship back to sea, then cast a glance astern at the taut cable and ducked for shelter.

Sea anchors were hastily thrown overside, but still the ship moved toward the beach.

The keel grated on sand and the ship continued in its forward motion as though, tired of the sea, it had decided to return to the forest.

At last, wedged among the trees, the vessel stopped, far from the sands of the beach. A wide path in sand and earth traced its progress.

Dontor stood, looking seaward. He shook his head unbelievingly, looked forward, then down at the ground beneath his ship. This was outside his experience. It was also outside the teaching so carefully instilled in his mind in the classrooms and later during long days and nights when he had been a junior priest. He had been taught to speak of sea demons, and to describe them and their actions. But no one had ever ordered him to really believe in their existence.

He wondered if the great Kondaro really existed—and if so, just what he might think of Dontor and of the ship he had so recently controlled. The thought crossed his mind that a real god might be somewhat critical of the priesthood of the sea.

"Something," he mused aloud, "will have to be done to prevent loss of faith."

Lanko flipped the switch, taking power from the tractor plates.

"Sea demons, that's us," he remarked. "And, boy, how Sira Nal's going to hate sea demons!"

21

Sira Nal drummed impatiently on the table before him.

"I thought you could handle routine operations," he said bitingly. "Now you tell me you've been losing ship after ship. What happened to them?"

The high priest shook his head. "We haven't been able to find out, Sir."

"Do you mean to tell me you haven't a single thing to report on them? Just—'they haven't come in'?"

"We have sent out investigating ships, Sir."

"And?"

"They haven't reported back, either."

Sira Nal's cheeks paled slightly with rage as he stared at his underling.

"Miron," he snapped, "I'm not going to tell you exactly what to do, or how. You're supposed to know how to treat emergencies, not to call on me every time something happens outside of routine. I want a report on those ships tomorrow morning." He glanced out of the window.

"I don't care how you do it, but find out what happened to those ships. And I don't ever want to hear you admit again that you can't account for any ship I ask about. Is that clear?"

Miron nodded unhappily. "Yes, Sir." He bowed and backed out of the room.

He forced himself to suppress his anger as he gently closed the door, then he stood for a moment, fists clenched, as he directed a furious gaze at the panels.

"How?" he thought. "How does he expect me to know what's going on at sea unless ships come in to give me information or I am able to go out personally. And how does he expect me to make a personal check in one night?"

He started walking along the corridor.

"I have no supernatural powers and he knows it. He's the prophet. And this is the sort of thing he should take care of. Wish I'd never . . ."

He looked at the walls around him, then shook his head. No use thinking of that. None had ever left the service of Kondaro—and lived. Of all people, he should be the most able to testify to that.

He continued to a stair, mounted it, then climbed ladders, to finally come out at the observation platform atop the temple. The

observer bowed as his superior entered the little room just below the torch.

"Have there been any arrivals?"

"None, Sir. I've sighted no sail."

"I am going to send you an acolyte. If you see anything, send him to me immediately. Instruct your relief to do likewise." Miron turned to go back to his quarters.

After Miron's departure, Sira Nal sat for a time, still staring at the closed door. He had caught the wave of frustrated rage and had almost responded. Then, he had forced himself to think logically. He was forced to admit that the priest had some justification. He had organized his forces adequately—had been a useful piece, within his limitations.

"I wonder," mused Sira Nal, "if Buron's pulling a sneak punch." He tilted his head. "It would be a little foul, but he might try something like that." He reviewed the rules they had agreed upon.

After all, this phase of his operation was outside of the home zone and therefore vulnerable to attack, even this early. He had assumed that Buron would be too busy developing his own pieces to spend any time on an offensive move at this stage. Of course, direct intervention was a little unethical, but it wasn't downright illegal—not in the opening and not out here. And Buron might try it.

He had thought his opponent would be too occupied to notice a move at this remote part of the sphere. And he had established this advance base by direct intervention, too. If Buron had noticed and if he had checked Nal's methods, he might have felt justified. And he just might have taken time for a quick, disruptive thrust. And, Sira Nal was forced to admit, such a move might be allowed by Kir. It might be even approved and hailed as a brilliant counter.

He rose to his feet, pacing about the room. If this were a move by Buron, the priesthood would be powerless to counter, of course. It would take direct action by the player. He grumbled to himself.

"I can't let this development be wasted. I'd lose too much time. I'll have to check personally."

He crossed to the window, opened it, and stepped out on the balcony.

Outside, the sun glinted on the harbor. A ship was standing out to sea, sails set to pick up the breeze from the headland. Sira Nal looked out toward the shipyards. It was a well organized secondary base and it could develop into a highly important and valuable position.

Somehow, he doubted that Buron would have been able to do as well, considering the time factor—and the human element. He shook his head. This must be retained.

He threw the robe back, checked his equipment belt, adjusted his body shield for invisibility, activated his levitation modulator, and stepped off the balcony.

He swept around the outgoing ship, noting the activity aboard with approval, then headed seaward, to follow the route he had prescribed for his navigators. Somewhere out there, he would undoubtedly find Buron, poised to strike at any ship which bore the red and gold of Kondaro.

And when he did find him, he knew, he would have to outline a counter move which would force immunity to his sea lanes. He considered the possibilities as he sped over the sea, heading first toward the islands which he had picked as a relay point for his ships.

Far ahead, the guard flier hovered over the largest of the islands, its anti-detector and refraction screens running at full power and its detectors fanned out to maximum range.

Musa sat before the detector screen, idly watching the vague patterns that grew and collapsed on the viewscreen. The scanner, Lanko had explained, picked up ghost images from heated air masses and from clouds. But it discriminated against them, eliminating any full presentation unless the impulse came from a massive body. Then it indicated range and azimuth. It checked the

body against the data fed into it and cut in selective magnification circuits if the predetermined criteria were met.

As Musa watched, a sea bird appeared on the screen, outlined sharply against the darkness of the sea. The scales flashed into view for an instant and the viewscreen tracked its target briefly until the reject circuits cut in and the scan was continued.

Another body appeared on the screen, seeming to come from under the sea. Musa looked at it curiously, noticing that the data scale presentation persisted. The screen was holding this object at center. A slight glow appeared, obscuring detail. More marks appeared in the data legend. Musa turned around.

"Banasel," he called. "What's this?"

Banasel was engaged in his usual pastime of tinkering with the equipment. He looked around, then walked quickly over to the screen to make adjustments. The object came into sharp focus, revealing itself as a man in the robes of Kondaro. Range and azimuth lines became clearly defined and a graph showed in the legend space. Banasel glanced down at the dials.

"Hey, Lanko," he called. "We've got a customer."

"Where?" Lanko came out of the mess compartment.

"Bearing about seventy-one, true, and coming in fast. Range, about two hundred K's. Low altitude—maybe a hundred meters." Banasel twisted dials, watching the result on his screen.

"Looks as though our friend's coming in for a conference."

"Screens?"

"Personal body shield. Probably a Morei twelve. Nothing special."

Lanko got into the gunner's chair and punched a button. The sighting screen lit, showing the approaching body clearly. He turned a knob, increasing magnification.

"All dressed up in his ceremonial robes, too," he said. "This kid could have done well as a clothing designer."

He adjusted a few knobs, examining a meter. Then, he reached for the weapons grip.

"No point in discussing matters with him now. He can talk

after we get him in here and he's just about in range now." He brought the hairlines on the viewscreen to center on the approaching figure and squeezed the grip.

Sira Nal felt the sudden pressure. Annoyed, he reached to his belt to turn his shield to full power. This was highly unethical. Buron should certainly know better than to resort to personal attack. The action could be protested and Sira Nal could demand concessions. He smiled tightly.

In fact, this was better than having to work out all the details of that counter move. He could demand complete immunity for his sea lanes. Or, if Buron chose to make this a personal encounter, he could teach the poor fool once and for all who was head man.

He looked ahead, searchingly. The horizon ahead was broken by a faint cloud which indicated the islands, but there was no evidence of his opponent. He shook his head and started to rise, but his shield was failing. Abruptly, he became aware that his power pack was overheating.

Something was decidedly wrong. He reached for his own hand weapon, still searching for his attacker. At last, he noticed a faint shimmer, dead ahead. He pointed the weapon.

"Now, now," cautioned a voice. "You could get hurt that way. Close down your shield and relax. This is a guard flier. You're in arrest tractor."

Sira Nal realized that the tractor was pulling him ahead with increasing speed. His power pack was heating up dangerously now.

Somehow, a stellar guardsman had traced him.

He was being captured!

Furiously, he thought of the attacks he had made in this very area. He could still remember the horrified expression on the face of one shipowner just before his ship broke to bits under him.

They wouldn't get him, though.

They couldn't!

He would blast them out of his path. Just as he had blasted those presumptuous natives who had tried to flaunt his power.

Thumbing the hand weapon to full disruptive blast, he centered it on the faint shimmer ahead and squeezed the trigger.

Let the meddlers look out for themselves.

Banasel winced as the fireball spread, then rose skyward, to form a large cloud far above the normal range of clouds.

"You could have released for a few microseconds," he protested. "The blast wouldn't have jolted our screen too much and you could have hooked him again and played him in."

"I know." Lanko flicked off the gunnery switches and leaned back, rubbing his forehead unhappily.

"I knew that, too. I knew his power pack was about to fail. And I fully intended to release, dammit, but the decision time was short and . . . well, frankly, that blast of pure hatred he put out overrode me for just too long. That was a dangerous boy!"

He turned toward the prison alcove. Genro Kir was looking with horrified fascination at the expanding cloud in the screen. Lanko touched a stud, releasing the sound barrier modulation.

"It's unfortunate. We'll try to get your other partner alive."

"You destroyed him!" Genro Kir looked sick. "You totally destroyed him. His very being was disintegrated."

"No, we didn't destroy him. He did that himself. He should have known better than to fire into a full power tractor—and with an unstable power unit? Well, he really asked for it." He frowned.

"I'll have to admit I did slip a little, but I assumed he was an ordinary, run of stock drone—like the type you represent. I didn't realize the full extent of his aberration."

Lanko got out of his chair and crossed the room, to confront the prisoner.

"Look, Kir. I don't know whether your other partner's like that one or not. But I think it's about time you helped a little. If you'd given us clues to Sira Nal's personality and probable location, we might have been able to take precautions. He might even be with us now." He paused, fixing the subject with a glacial stare.

"Or do you enjoy setting things up so that your friends turn themselves into flaming clouds of smoke?"

"You mean you think I . . . I'm responsible . . . for that?"

"Judge yourself. You helped them. You refused any assistance in their capture. You had obviously edited those tapes of yours to some extent. I've no doubt there were incidents you cut out which could have told us something about Sira Nal. And you knew we'd be finding them one way or another." He jerked a thumb back of him.

"There's the result."

Kir directed a horrified look at the screen.

"What can I do?"

"Get in contact with Buron Koree. Tell him what happened here. Tell him, too, that we're looking for him and that other elements of the Philosophical Command are on their way here. Explain to him that there will be direction finders on him very soon and that any effort he may make to use his body shield or weapons will be noted and will lead to him. Even unshielded thought radiations will give him away.

"Once you establish contact, we will ride in, if you wish. And we can assure him that he'll be either hunted down promptly, or he will have to assume and really live the role of a native—and a very inconspicuous, uninfluential native, at that.

"Tell him that he is free to come to us and surrender at any time during the next planetary day. After that, he will be taken by the most expedient means. After the surrender deadline, our whole concern will be to rid the planet of his presence and you can assure him that his life—even his total being—will be of far less importance to us and to the rest of the Command than that of the most humble creature on this planet.

"Here's your mental amplifier. Use it."

Genro Kir looked at the proffered circlet. Slowly, he extended a hand. He took the device, turned it around in his hands for a few moments, then put it on.

Suddenly, his face set in decision and he sat quietly for a while, grim faced. At last, he looked up.

"I got him. He argued a little, but he had a poor argument and he knew it. He'll be here within an hour, screens down."

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BANASEL LEANED BACK in his chair, stretching his arms out luxuriously.

"You know, these people on the first class ships know how to live." He looked around the cabin. "We ought to be able to figure out some way to dress up that flier of ours."

Lanko glanced at him. "You're the technician," he commented. "Why don't you get at it when this inspection's over?" He frowned.

"Wonder how the evaluation team is coming out. Hope they don't tear us up too much."

Banasel grinned. "Oh, we didn't do too badly," he said. "Of course, we did goof that one, but . . ." His grin faded.

"Yeah," he added. "We did miss a bet or two, didn't we?" He sat forward.

"Now you've got me sweating," he complained. "And in a fresh uniform, too."

There was a tap at the door. Lanko turned.

"Come in."

A huge figure towered in the doorway, the short horns on his forehead almost touching the lintel. Lanko looked at him curiously. He had seen few capriform humanoids, and the first one had been . . . He shook his head.

"No," he told himself, "this is another guardsman."

The long fleshy face split in an engaging smile.

"Guardsmen Lanko and Banasel?"

"Right."

"The Commander'll be expecting you in a few minutes. Follow me."

Lanko got to his feet. "Let's go, then."

They followed their guide through the passages, finally stopping at a curtained archway. The big capriform stopped, then looked at them curiously.

"You picked up those drones down there?"

Lanko nodded. "Yes. We were a little slow about it, but we got 'em."

Again, the smile grew on the long face. As Lanko examined it, he realized there was wistful sadness there, too. It wasn't the sardonic smile of pure amusement it superficially resembled.

"I suppose I'll get assigned to some of those operations some day," the big man said. "Wonder if I'll handle 'em right. You see, I just got out of . . . of training. This is my first assignment."

He turned abruptly and swept the curtains aside, motioning them to go through. Then he turned, his hoofs clicking on the tiles as he walked rapidly away with his short, almost mincing steps. Lanko looked after him.

How, he wondered, did those tiny hoofs carry all that weight? The fellow must have a mass pretty close to a couple of hundred kilograms, standard. And under that mass, the slender ankles and tiny, pointed hoofs looked almost ridiculously inadequate.

But he had seen another of about that same size in motion. They could almost fly when they wanted to. He turned away, then snapped to attention and flipped his hand up in salute.

'Guardsmen Lanko and Banasel reporting, Sir, as ordered."

"At ease." Captain Kembar looked searchingly at them.

"Recognize your guide?"

"Sir?"

Kembar smiled. "He's like a lot of his race. They're really almost

painfully shy, you know. Truth is, that one just came to us out of rehabilitation. You should remember him from years back."

Lanko's eyes widened. "Senemanos?"

"That's right." Kembar nodded. "Junior Security Tech. He'll be a good one, too, now he's straightened out." He smiled.

"But you had another visitation, I see."

"Yes, Sir." Lanko nodded. "We were a little slow, too. I'm afraid there'll have to be quite a clean-up."

Kembar nodded slowly. "It'll take some planning." He smiled wryly.

"And this time, we'll put out quarantine markers and full range automatic detectors. If anyone drops in on you again, you'll know about it. This last one's not altogether on you, you see." He paused.

"Well, the Commander's waiting for you." He turned.

They followed him into an inner office, then came to attention again.

Commander A-Riman nodded.

"At ease," he said. "Couple of chairs there." He nodded, then looked down at the recording cassettes on his desk.

"It seems a little rough on one planet to get hit twice in just a few cycles," he remarked. "But it happened." He looked up, leaning back.

"These boys you got did quite a bit of rearranging during their stay, too."

Lanko straightened in his chair, waiting.

A-Riman looked at him, then nodded.

"We've evaluated the tapes, and we've evaluated your on-the-ground work. Your estimate of the situation was right. You did spend a little too much time in your own garden. On the other hand, the cultivation you did was good and the time was well spent. There just weren't enough of you. We'll correct that.

"And your security was good, as far as it went, but these three stumbled on just the right path to evade your monitors. If they'd made any real reconnaissance of the planet, you'd have had some

warning, but they didn't do that. They simply took a quick look, came in on your blind side, and set down. You didn't pick them up and they didn't pick you up." He shrugged, looking at the cassettes.

"There's no question of the fact that your action, once you became aware of trouble, was adequate and well directed. And it got results." He sighed.

"In the future, you'll have more assistance—and better surveillance equipment. You've picked up one man and we'll train him. Then, we'll pick up more to give you a six man team. That'll let you cover the planet.

"Of course, you had no way of knowing it, but the Command's been pretty well occupied. There were a number of things we should have done that didn't get done, simply because there were more urgent things to do. For example, this is the first full inspection and evaluation tour we've been able to make. But there will be more and they'll come more often."

He glanced down at some papers on his desk, then fixed his attention again on the two men.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "those drones of yours came up with some pretty drastic innovations. A good deal of that will have to be cut back and we've got teams out now, laying out their plans. They'll take care of that detail and you will make survey on their results, of course.

"Then, we'll expect full planetary survey from you each ten cycles. You can send this in quarter cycle increments, of course." He paused.

"Oh, yes," he added. "There's one more thing." He jerked his head back to indicate a large flag which stood behind him.

"We've all been transferred out of CAC, permanently. The Council has approved this Command as a Corps. This, of course, gives me full promotion authority." He smiled.

"And I'm taking advantage of it. Since you'll have four more men working with you shortly, one of you will have to have at least first class rating. The other can't be less than second class. I've

elected to give you both first class ratings, with you, Lanko, as senior man.

"We took care of that, too. Your orders are dated one day apart and they give each of you the grade of First Class Planetary Operative, Philosophical Corps, Stellar Guard."